BREAKING BAD AS A MODERN WESTERN: REVISING FRONTIER MYTHS OF MASCULINITY, SAVAGERY, AND EMPIRE

by

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*Breaking Bad* as a Modern Western: Revising Frontier Myths of Masculinity, Savagery, and Empire

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper offers an analysis of the AMC television series *Breaking Bad* by placing it directly into the tradition of frontier narratives and the Western film. It looks to understand the aspects of the Western genre that the series revises as well as understand *Breaking Bad* as both a revisionist Western that redefines certain tropes common to the family-centered Western, as well as a Meta-Western that calls attention to the impact of the frontier myth on modern characters like Walter White. It finds that to make a “contemporary Western,” as creator Vince Gilligan termed it, the show revises the traditional Western narrative by denying a regenerative quality to violence and demanding a multicultural, complicated, and ongoing understanding of the American frontier. The paper concludes by analyzing how the show’s cultural allegories are a reaction to, and a critique of, a modern crisis of masculinity and the American empire.

The form and content of this abstract are approved. I recommend its publication.

Approved: Philip Joseph
DEDICATION

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INTRODUCTION

In an interview with Bill Nevins in March 2013, *Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan said: “Gradually, after the first *Breaking Bad* episode, it started to dawn on me that we could be making a contemporary Western. So you see scenes that are like gunfighters squaring off, like Clint Eastwood and Lee Van Cleef.”¹ *Breaking Bad* chronicles the story of the emasculated, genius, high-school chemistry teacher Walter White (Bryan Cranston) who is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Over the course of the series he is transformed into a hyper-violent international meth producing drug kingpin—his alter ego “Heisenberg.” Walt is accompanied in this transformation by Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul), a meth producer, user, and ex-student of Walt’s. The cast of characters and this five-season plot might not immediately invoke the Western tradition, so this thesis works to understand what, exactly, is contemporary or modern about *Breaking Bad*’s portrayal of the frontier. It looks to understand the aspects of the Western genre that the series revises as well as place *Breaking Bad* as both a revisionist Western that redefines certain tropes common to the family-centered Western, as well as a Meta-Western that calls attention to the impact of the frontier myth on modern characters like Walter White.

The modern conversation about the frontier is one that is always working to understand and revise the century-old theoretical discussion inspired by Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 Frontier Thesis, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. In the Thesis, Turner argues that the frontier was a meeting place between

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savagery and civilization. The frontier, for Turner, was a place in which the westering pioneers were transformed by the savage laws of the natural frontier but ultimately tamed those laws and settled the land. Theorists have since troubled this theory by accepting the real and lasting effects of violence on the frontier and redefining the frontier in more culturally responsible ways. In her influential and essential works of cultural history *The Legacy of Conquest* and “The Frontier in American Culture,” American historian Patricia Limerick works to revise the pervasive (and idealistic) Turnerian frontier into a modern frontier that is more historically accurate and culturally and theoretically competent. She defines this frontier as “la frontera”:

There is the much more familiar, English, usage of the frontier as the place where white settlers entered a zone of ‘free’ land and opportunity. But there is the much less familiar, but much more realistic, usage of *la frontera*, the borderlands between Mexico and the United States. This is not simply a place where two groups meet…In the twentieth century with conflicts over the restriction of immigration, with disputes over water flow and environmental pollution, and with a surge of industrial development and population growth from American-owned businesses (maquiladoras) operating in northern Mexico, conditions along the border remain far from tranquil. In the idea of *la frontera*, there is no illusion of vacancy, of triumphal conclusions, or of simplicity.

The frontier as a borderland where countries, peoples, and armies meet in an ongoing process of cultural import is exactly the frontier that Gilligan generates in *Breaking Bad*. Limerick goes on to redefine the frontier as a space consisting of multiple “borders between countries, between peoples, between authorities, sometimes between armies.”

In a move that challenges Turner’s “closing” of the frontier, Limerick argues that the

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5 Limerick “The Frontier in American Culture”
frontier remains to be a complex, populated and evolving borderland. *Breaking Bad* generates just such a multicultural borderland that threatens the traditional ethnocentric understanding of the historic and current frontiers.

Much like Turner’s belief that the frontier was a wide, free, savage land meant to be conquered and tamed, Walter White sees the meth industry as wild, savage, and unsophisticated—a space that he can tame with his superior understanding of chemistry. Following the criticism of Turner’s claims that the frontier movement was not a purely positive development of civilization in an empty land, but instead a conquest,\(^6\) Walt finds that the wilderness (meth production and sales) is in fact inhabited by a developed and organized system that he must conquer.

In this modernized frontier space, *Breaking Bad* modifies the family-centered tradition of Western cinema. Many Westerns rely on a tradition of protecting, restoring, or creating the family unit through violence (John Ford’s *Stagecoach*, *The Searchers*; Fred Zinneman’s *High Noon*; Henry Hathaway’s *True Grit*). *Breaking Bad* denies many of the narrative traditions common to family-centered Westerns by not allowing violence to be a groundwork on which Walt’s family can be maintained or saved. It contemporizes the Western genre by presenting a violent protagonist who also has a family—he is not a lone gunman, but a modern, highly skilled entrepreneur searching the lawless space of the frontier for a kind of masculinity that he does not have as a father. He sets out, like many great Western protagonists, to keep his family whole, but unlike the Westerns in the tradition, his violence tears them apart.

The first chapter places *Breaking Bad* into a specific tradition of the family-centered Western that explores the role of the family unit on the frontier by placing it next to various films in order to establish its identity as a revised Western. Specifically I explore John Ford’s *Stagecoach* and *The Searchers*, aspects of Fred Zinneman’s *High Noon*, and finally, Clint Eastwood’s revisionist *Unforgiven*. This collection of Westerns serves to provide a sampling of the narrative tradition as well as comparative protagonists with which to put Walter White. Primarily, it looks to establish one of the key elements of the series that denies the regenerative quality of violence in its unrelenting collapse of the domestic and wilderness spaces. I offer an in-depth analysis of how the series denies the traditional relationship between domesticity and violence by analyzing how the series places domesticity and wilderness into an ongoing and inseparable relationship that contaminates the domestic space. In this chapter, I look closely into the violence Walt exerts over his family and others in order to exemplify the series’ denial that violence can serve to maintain the domestic. Rather, in the series, we see a more realistic dynamic in which violence destroys the family. Additionally, this chapter argues that Walt, confronted with a failure to keep the savage violence away from his family, rhetorically places himself as a victim of circumstance in order to justify his use of violence. This discussion ends by considering the irrevocable damage Walt’s violence does to his family, and how that is metaphorically and literally played out in the material nature of his home and his domestic relationships.

The second chapter adds another classic western archetype to the conversation by analyzing how the myth of the masculine Western gunslinger in spaghetti westerns like Sergio Leone’s *Once Upon a Time in the West* and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*
invoke a modern crisis of masculinity in Walt through a use of familiar icons like the cowboy hat and the gun. This chapter goes on to explore the role of masculinity in the show as representative of a current cultural fear about the dissolution of the dominant role of white American men. Walter White, as well as many other leading male roles in recent popular television dramas, is in a crisis of masculinity. This chapter explores Walt’s crisis as it juggles a myth of manhood and the role of the father as a provider, as well as the role of violent aggression in defining masculinity. The chapter concludes by exploring the current cultural fear about the decline of the American empire.

The paper concludes by briefly iterating the concept of *Breaking Bad* as a meta-Western and the cultural import of such a narrative to the Western tradition. This explains that Walt, as a representative white American male, becomes a specter of American manhood and the American Dream.
CHAPTER I

THE COLLAPSE OF THE DOMESTIC AND WILDERNESS

I believe it is possible for a man, Walter White, to go out and to kill a rival of his, and yet wash his hands and gently and lovingly pick up his baby daughter and caress her and love her as a father. We are capable of that, of those wide swings as human beings. It is frightening in a way.⁷

– Bryan Cranston on his character Walter White

Placing Breaking Bad in the Western Tradition

The above quote is indicative of the character the series creates with Walter White, but the show revises the relationship between the domestic sphere and the violent wilderness because both exist within Walt, but the outcome of this coexistence is destructive to his family. In order to see what Breaking Bad revises with regards to the family tradition in the Western and ideals of domesticity on the frontier, we can look at the relationship between the family unit and violence in a few classic family-centered Westerns. In John Ford’s Stagecoach and The Searchers, we see traditional Western archetypes and values played out. In Stagecoach, a group of white pioneers venture out into a vast unsettled landscape under the constant threat of the violent and dehumanized American Indians. In the frontier landscape we meet a collection of archetypes, the prostitute, the man of the law, the drunken doctor, the lover trying to get to her husband, and the protagonist “criminal with a good heart” played by John Wayne. They survive the violence of the wilderness in a climactic attack on the stagecoach by the American Indians, an attack finally saved by the military cavalry. In the end, after much death and other acts of violence including a fatal shootout in which John Wayne’s character kills three men in an act of revenge, all possible family units are restored and the wilderness is

settled both physically and metaphorically. The Ringo Kid (John Wayne), the criminal, is allowed to settle his revenge through violence and murder, and yet both he and the prostitute ride off into the sunset to his ranch in Texas, escaping their wild behavior and choosing to be settled. In a process that aligns with Turner’s description of the frontier, past crimes are forgiven and balance is restored through settlement and family. The law forgives The Ringo Kid under the principle that he is now going to be settled. The family unit holds a metaphoric power that allows the law to forgive murder if the act of violence was done to restore domesticity.

While *The Searchers* came later in Ford’s career and the shape of the protagonist changes, it continues the importance of the family unit. It relies on similar concepts that favor settlement and view violence as necessary if only to restore the family. In the film, American Indians kidnap a girl from a white pioneer family in an act of savagery. The entire film is dedicated to the search for the girl in order to bring her back and restore the family. Here, the protagonist is not directly part of the family unit, but he is also not an outlaw. He is an ex-confederate officer who fits into the independent masculine cowboy archetype, but he is still driven by restoring certain values. He spends five years searching for the girl and saves her in a violent climax in which he scalps her captor, the American Indian Scar. She is saved through violence. The different shape of the protagonist (when compared to the end of *Stagecoach*) is obvious in the epic final shot. He carries the girl to the porch of the family, restoring the family unit and ideals, but rather than fitting into the family, he turns away as they enter the house and returns alone back to the dusty, windy desert. The violent individual can still help to restore the family,

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8 *The Searchers*, directed by John Ford (1939; Santa Clarita, California: Walter Wanger Productions), Streaming video.
but is no longer, as in *Stagecoach*, able to find that settlement himself. This kind of principled narrative is repeated countless times in the Western tradition.\(^9\)

This anti-hero role paved the way for the protagonists in Westerns such as *True Grit* and *Unforgiven*. In *Unforgiven*, Will Munny (Clint Eastwood) is called away from his family ranch (where his two children reside and a gravestone marks the burial site of his deceased wife) in order to take revenge on a band of violent cowboys on behalf of a disgraced and wounded prostitute. The film, therefore, allows for varying levels of acceptable violence—there is a code of honor that Munny acts to uphold. *Unforgiven*, differently than *Stagecoach*, twists the protagonist into a character who is not entirely untouched by the violence of the frontier. It calls into question the myth of the violent gunman and allows the protagonist to feel guilt and sadness for his past violence. After a mythic shootout where he survives a fight in which he was wildly outnumbered, Munny returns to his children and stands by the grave of his wife. His image fades out and an epilogue explains that the mother of his wife would never know “why her only daughter had married a known thief and murderer, a man of notoriously vicious and intemperate disposition.”\(^10\) Munny is a revised protagonist, one who is affected by the violence he performs, but still uses violence to defend domestic ideals. His act of violence is defensible because it serves as revenge for another, more grotesque violence.

Even anti-heroes in the Western play a role to restore the family unit (as John Wayne’s characters do in both *The Searchers* and *True Grit*), but the modern landscape of the frontier narrative in *Breaking Bad* does not allow Walt this restoration. His actions are irreversible and his violence (physical and emotional) so extreme that the family unit

\(^9\) This theme can be seen in Henry Hathaway’s *True Grit*, Sergio Leone’s *Once Upon a Time in the West*, and many others.

\(^10\) *Unforgiven*, directed by Clint Eastwood (1992; Alberta, Canada: Warner Bros.), Streaming video.
falls apart in spite of his desire to save it. The savagery he employs does not allow a regenerative settlement. While Munny in Unforgiven is psychologically distressed by his past violence, the violence still allows him to move on and settle with his children. Walt simultaneously plays the role of the violent outsider and father, but instead of restoring the family he is the agent of its dissolution. Walt cannot go into the lawless space of the frontier, scalp his enemy, and return victorious as John Wayne did. In fact, when he does succeed in killing Gus Fring, the most pronounced opposition to Walt in the series, the violence only serves to intensify his wife’s fear of him. He cannot, like Munny, violently kill a room full of gunslingers only to return to his children and move away. After Walt’s final shootout, he dies alone and leaves a severely damaged family behind. The once principled and regenerative relationships between family, settlement, and savagery in Western narratives are, in Breaking Bad, destructive.

This is in part because Breaking Bad does not take place in the same culturally mythic space of the west where threats to family, and therefore the role of the hero to protect it, fulfill archetypes. The aforementioned westerns are set in the past, and as such the culturally limited archetypes of the savage American Indian and the nobly violent white cowboy persist. The threat to the family unit not only comes from outside of the family, but it comes from people who are outside of society either because of their culture or because of their behavior outside of the law. In Stagecoach and The Searchers, the threat is the archetypal “othered” American Indian, while in True Grit, Once Upon a Time in the West, and High Noon the threat is a group of lawless men of various degrees. Even in Unforgiven, a revisionist western seemingly set apart, the threat to the family unit

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comes from outside of the family in the form of, initially, a group of bandits, and finally, a group of men led by a corrupt sheriff. In all of these narratives, the violent heroes and anti-heroes protect and restore domestic relationships. *Breaking Bad* then, inverts the nature of the threat toward the family by defining Walt, the father who believes himself to be the protector, as a threat.

In the fourth season of the show in the episode “Cornered,” the conversations between Walt and his wife Skylar serve to finalize what is already evident to the audience: that Walt is, in addition to the protector of the family, also its most imminent threat. This scene is a defining moment as Skylar feels the family is under threat and begs Walt to do what is necessary to save the family. She is calling on him to fulfill the role of the classic Western hero, but his response indicates the series’ denial of that role for Walt:

Skylar: Walt, I've said it before. If you are in danger, we go to the police.
Walt: I don't wanna hear about the police.
Skylar: I do not say that lightly. I know what it could do to this family. But if it's the only real choice we have, if it's either that or you getting shot…You're not some hardened criminal, Walt. You are in over your head. That's what we'll tell them, the truth.
Walt: That is not the truth.
Skylar: Of course it is: a schoolteacher, cancer, desperate for money…Roped into working; unable to quit. You told me that yourself, Walt. Jesus, what was I thinking? Walt, please. Let's both of us stop trying to justify this whole thing and admit you're in danger.
Walt: Who are you talking to right now? Who is it you think you see? Do you know how much I make a year? I mean, even if I told you, you wouldn't believe it. You know what would happen if I decided to stop going in to work?…No. You clearly don't know who you're talking to, so let me clue you in. I am not in danger, Skyler. I am the danger. A guy opens his door and gets shot, and you think that of me? No. I am the one who knocks.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{12} “Cornered” *Breaking Bad*, created by Vince Gilligan (2011; Albuquerque, New Mexico: High Bridge Productions), Streaming video. Emphasis added
Quite a few essential things happen in this sequence. Skylar attempts to paint Walt as the protector of the family and even persuade him to believe the story himself. She tells him that he is “not some hardened criminal” and that he is ultimately a victim of circumstance. Walt, rather than fulfilling the role of protector, interprets himself as the danger that Skylar fears. Walt metaphorically denies the frontier myth that would allow his past actions to be justified in the service of protecting his family. This moment warrants a more specific comparison to the denial of mythic identities that takes place in *Unforgiven*. When the young gunslinger “The Schofield Kid” (James Woolvett) discusses Munny’s violent past with him, Munny denies the myth of a glorious kind of violence and establishes Munny’s past behavior as psychologically damaging. Here, Munny denies the myth of the gun-slinging cowboy in lieu of a man who has committed violent acts for which he cannot forgive himself. This places Munny as a tragic character who, because of his seeming alignment with some kind of justice, still remains in the favor of the audience and can act as the protecting agent of his family. *Breaking Bad* furthers this movement toward a deconstructed hero and a reinterpretation of the impact of violence. Skylar wants to paint Walt with a narrative that allows the violence to be justified, but the frontier in *Breaking Bad* does not allow a protagonist to have that kind of ideal finish. Not only does the violence affect Walt, it is something that he embraces, a choice that accounts for Walt’s failure to fulfill the role of the traditional frontier hero by saving or protecting the family unit.

At the end of the same episode, the destructive impact of Walt’s fearful identity on his family is solidified. This moment comes after Walt irresponsibly purchases a
sports car for his son, an action that could put serious suspicion on their family, as publically, and legally, they do not have much money:

Skylar: And if you're so invested in protecting this family it means protecting the story. What do you think the neighbors are gonna say, Walt? What about Hank and Marie? How about the IRS? What were you thinking, Walt?

Walt: I was thinking that I wanted to do something nice for my son. Look. I just worry that he'll blame you for this.

Skylar: Oh, he will. Once again, he'll blame his bitch mother for taking away what his loving father has given him. So thanks for that. But you know what, Walt? Someone has to protect this family from the man who protects this family.

This scene denies a favorable interpretation of Walt, and puts Skylar, Walt’s wife, in the position to play the role of the protector while Walt is simultaneously the protector and aggressor. His actions endanger his family by potentially raising suspicion and also force Skylar into a position that will serve to harm her relationship with her son. She is tasked with upholding the lie that they have created in order to keep secret the illegal wealth Walt amasses cooking meth. Walt maintains the appearance of protecting the family and unjustly reaps the adulation of his son.

*Rethinking the Domestic and the Wilderness: Space and Behavior*

The conceptually productive relationship between the savage wilderness and the domestic sphere began with Turner. He insisted that the development of America was a result of “the history of colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.”13 By describing the relationship as one of settlement, and one where the “free land” continually receded, he set up a relationship between civilization and untamed land that productively served to help create the American character. What

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complicated this relationship was that Turner did not believe it to be one sided; he believed that it was the interrelationship between these two worlds that defined American development in terms of adaptation and not exclusively domination. Turner hides the violence of the West and treats settlement as a regenerative process that gives life to civilization. *Breaking Bad* places the violence at the forefront of the narrative, a move that aligns with contemporary thought on the historic and literary significance of the American West that attempts to understand the violent and destructive nature of the frontier in American history. In *Breaking Bad*, the conquest that classically allowed for settlement, destroys civilization rather than protecting it.

Gilligan utilizes Walt’s profession as a chemistry teacher to provide the show with a metaphor to help frame Walt’s transformative relationship with savagery. In the pilot episode, Walt gives a brief lecture on Chemistry in which he explains that chemistry is, after all, the study of change:

Walt: Chemistry is the study of what?
Student: Chemicals (Snickers from the smart kids) Walt smiles.
Walt: Chemicals. No. Change. Chemistry is the study of change. (a beat) Think about it. Electrons change their orbits, molecules change their bonds. Elements combine and change into compounds. That’s all of life, right? The constant (shrug) The cycle. Solution, dissolution, over and over. (Walt seems to be talking mostly to himself. A pep talk.) Growth, decay. Transformation. It’s fascinating, really.14

Walter White is a man who rapidly oscillates between the wilderness and the domestic in a way impossible in previous frontier narratives and classic Westerns. In classic Westerns, the savagery in the landscape often takes place at a geographical distance from the domestic space. Walt does not simply venture out into the wild and

immediately return a completely changed man, or succeed in changing the wilderness as a traditional Western protagonist might. The nature of his change is defined by his ability to live simultaneously in both worlds, a reality that defines his change as the process of allowing the more violent persona to take over. He simultaneously exists as a high school teacher who bites his lip when a student acts out, and a meth cook who will kill men and dispose of the evidence to survive.¹⁵

His evolution is defined by the rapid movement back and forth in which he develops, and is eventually conquered by, his lust for power. He transforms from a humble, quiet, easily manipulated father and teacher, to a relentless power hungry emperor of the meth industry. He does so within New Mexico’s remote desert landscape, but also urban sprawl and the geographic and cultural reality of the borderland between the United States and Mexico. What allows for the close proximity and rapid movement back and forth over the border between wilderness and domestic are modes of transportation (the RV), technology (cell phones), and the modern reality of the American West as a vast land seeded with areas of dense urban development. If American culture has persistently figured the frontier as a space of dynamic change and evolution, then *Breaking Bad* brings that evolution into a modern reality and explores its consequences.

In another interesting revision of the frontier threat to the family, both Walt’s diagnosis with cancer, and the parts of Walt’s personality that choose to do detrimental things to his family, come from within him rather than an othered savage culture. The initial enemy to Walt, his own mortality, is not an outside force that he can conquer through physical violence. As a result, in the series, we see the wilderness space and

¹⁵ “Pilot,” *Breaking Bad*
Walt’s behavior in that space bleed into the domestic, motivating a domestic dissolution and transformation. Domesticity and wilderness in *Breaking Bad* are spaces and behaviors that seem to defy a classic relationship that would empower one over the other. The first two seasons of the show explore Walt’s failure to contain these two spaces and behaviors.

This breakdown of the dynamic between violence and the domestic sphere calls forth William Handley’s revision of frontier protagonists and relationships. Handley looks to move the Western conversation away from archetypes: “The concomitant tendencies – to romanticize the good folks and divide them from the demonized bad folks – are a legacy of the Western itself (if not the Western world). It is that dualistic tendency I want to resist and rethink.”

He uses marriage as a way to revise the frontier conversation and the language and methods employed when discussing Western stories: “Literary concerns with Western marriage in settings both before and after the ‘end’ of the frontier and in both formula Westerns and more ‘high brow’ Western fiction, counter the prevailing cultural myth that the frontier chiefly produced the masculine individual.”

He further specifies this concept of family through the lens of violence: “While violence is the traditional preserve of masculinity in formula Westerns, the pervasive theme of female domesticity versus male lawless freedom breaks down in other twentieth-century

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17 Handley *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West* 2. Here Handley also argues that the frontier narratives commonly put forth a “dysfunctional family.” This idea warrants much more interpretation with regards to modern westerns as well as the western genre as a whole, but was not appropriate for this discussion.
Western texts, in which marriage does not serve to civilize the savage male violence of the frontier but rather serves to bring that violence home.”

Domesticity is something that throughout the series Walt defends and, to some extent, is the driving force behind his behavior. While this fits with a family-centered Western narrative in which the savage wilderness is settled in order to keep the domestic family together, *Breaking Bad* fulfills Handley’s modern frontier as Walt brings the violence home and contaminates the very domesticity he believes he is trying to defend. Violence takes place in the New Mexican desert but is also contained within Walt and motivates the continual contamination of his family despite his best efforts. The domestic, as it is explored and developed in *Breaking Bad*, is both a space and a behavior befitting that space.

*Overlap of The Domestic and the Wilderness*

As the show progresses, the domestic and wilderness become less defined by their physical locale, and more defined by what Walt does in those spaces. Befitting the frontier tradition, Walt’s transformation occurs in the frontier between the domestic and wilderness. The show explores this frontier through Walt’s attempts to contain the two identities and behaviors, and the slow contamination of his family. This is done through images and narrative sequences of crossover where Walt’s violence enters his home causing a systemic destruction of his family.

Jesse and Walt’s respective houses are stages for visual and narrative representations of the overlap. Jesse’s house is an epicenter of the confrontation between

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18 Handley *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West* 5.
19 The dissolution of his relationship with Skylar and how it is motivated by the wilderness is much more fully explored later in this section
the domestic and wilderness, and is used to bring that conflict into the lexicon of the show. This is most salient in the sequence of events leading up to, during, and after Walt’s first murders, the murder of Krazy-8 and Emilio, local meth distributors, in the first season episodes “The Cat’s in the Bag” and “…and the Bag’s in the River.” In these early episodes, the show confronts the frontier by alternating between violence, the family, and the idea of home as guiding principles of the cinematography.

The murder of Krazy-8’s partner Emilio takes place in a remote location in the desert. Even though the violence occurs in geographic wilderness, the show denies the possibility that the violence will remain there. It comes home as soon as Walt and Jesse park the RV outside of Jesse’s house. Recall for a moment Ethan’s (John Wayne) scalping of the American Indian in *The Searchers* or Munny’s epic shootout in *Unforgiven* when the violence takes place in a locale distant from the home space it hopes to protect. This is not the case in *Breaking Bad*. Both Walt and Jesse have some sense that the significance of carrying bodies in the RV is amplified by bringing them back to a neighborhood dictated by laws and expectations of safety. They both want some kind of separation between the business of cooking meth and the lives they intend to live outside of drug production. There is a sense that any crossover will poison the latter.

Once they leave the desert, the show introduces the conflicts that arise due to their choice to bring evidence of their violence back with them. Although the RV/Mobile meth lab and the two bodies are at Jesse’s house, Walt’s domestic space is also under attack by Jesse’s phone calls. At one point, Walt is on the phone in his home next to his wife Skylar (Anna Gunn) listening to Jesse scream about a body moving around in the RV outside of his house. Walt whispers to Jesse to calm down as Skylar walks up behind him.
While Skylar does not trust Walt in this moment, the gravity of Walt’s violent behavior is clear when contrasted with his role as a father. Both Walt and Jesse’s domestic worlds are threatened by the violence they inflict.

The show uses Walt’s lectures on chemistry to push the synthesis of frontier ideas that is so essential to understanding the show’s effort to represent the caustic relationship between violence and domesticity:

So the term chiral derives from the Greek word hand. Now the concept here being that just as your left hand and your right hand are mirror images of one another, right, identical and yet opposite, well so two organic compounds can exist as mirror image forms of one another all the way down at the molecular level. But although they may look the same, they don’t always behave the same.20

His lecture describes a chemical concept that has very clear rules; the opposing sides of a chiral compound may “look the same” but as Walt points out, “they don’t always behave the same.” This lecture comes in a moment of rising crisis and introduces Walt’s conflict between the mirror images within himself. Just like the example of the hands, while they may look the same, they are not in fact superimposable. This tension is caused because Walt wants these two personae to coexist, but somehow stay separate. The nature of the frontier will not allow such complete and clear separation—he finishes his lecture at school, all the while knowing that he is responsible for one dead man, and one severely injured man, lying in an RV in a suburban neighborhood.

Jesse and Walt cannot contain the evidence of the violence and it rapidly begins to contaminate Jesse’s home and neighborhood. Visually, as Walt drives to Jesse’s house,

20 “Cat’s in the Bag,” Breaking Bad, created by Vince Gilligan (2008; Albuquerque, New Mexico: High Bridge Productions), Streaming video.
the fusion of violence and domesticity becomes strikingly apparent and the hard and fast chemical laws of chirality are absent. Walt drives his SUV through quiet suburban streets past ranch style houses with bright green manicured yards as Clyde McPhatter’s classic “You’re Moving me” plays on his stereo. This seemingly domestic moment is broken as he glances down at the Hydrofluoric acid he has stolen from the school with which he is going to dissolve a dead body, and as he turns the corner, shambling like a zombie up the middle of the road, is the severely ill Krazy-8. As Walt swerves around the stumbling man, the camera cuts to a shot outside of the car, McPhatter’s song still audible but drowned out by the sounds of Walt’s screeching tires and Krazy-8’s labored breathing. Walt pulls up to Krazy-8, who tries to run and ends up knocking himself out on a tree. Walt then gets out of the car, looks around to see if anyone is watching him, and, with a two car garage visible in the background, he pulls the unconscious body into the back of the car as McPhatter’s voice croons over the soundtrack once again.\footnote{21 “Cat’s in the Bag,” \textit{Breaking Bad}}

This sequence, and the events leading up to Krazy-8’s murder establishes a few important things: Walt cannot contain the violence, Jesse and Walt are overwhelmed, and their violence will not restore the domestic. Jesse’s domestic space is under siege because evidence of his savagery physically infiltrates his home that physically and metaphorically begins to fall apart.

Walt refuses to understand the detriment of bringing the violence home when it comes to someone else’s house. Walt is dealing with a severely injured man whom he tried to kill, and he asks Jesse: “What is his reputation for violence?” to which Jesse responds, “Well, um he did try to kill us both yesterday, so there's that.” Walt tries to find
a way out of the situation that will not necessitate murder: “What I'm trying to say is that he's a distributor, right? He's a... He's a businessman... he's a man of business. It would therefore seem to follow that he is capable of acting out of mutual self-interest, yes? Do you think he is capable of listening to reason?” Jesse quickly responds to this far too logical concept: “What kind of reason? Like ‘Dear Krazy-8, listen, if I let you go, will you promise not to come back and waste my family? No Colombian neckties.’ You mean that kind of reason? No, man, I can't say as I have high hopes where that's concerned.”

Walt wants to contain the violence, and now that they are in a suburban neighborhood, he does not think in terms of violence alone. He is not willing to resort to violence when he is not directly threatened, but insists on a peaceful way out of a situation that is born from violence.

Jesse’s home is irrevocably contaminated by their efforts to erase the evidence of their violence. Walt emphasizes that they have to deal with the body “in a way that no one will ever find it.” He then suggests “chemical disincorporation,” which disgusts Jesse. Moments after Walt attempts to have a business conversation with Krazy-8, he is willing to dispose of a body chemically. He oscillates between the two sides of his metaphoric chirality, but despite his desire to keep the worlds separate, everything leading up to the murder defines the frontier as a space of destructive violence.

Having brought the evidence of their violence home, Walt and Jesse depend on the resources of the city to erase the evidence. Whereas the vast landscape of the reservation would have offered plenty of places to bury a body, again, the show refuses to allow that kind of separation. Jesse has to shop in a home improvement store for a

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22 “Cat’s in the Bag,” *Breaking Bad*

23 This is a part of Walt’s rhetoric of necessity explored later in this chapter.
container in which he can melt Emilio’s corpse. Jesse pulls the container off of the shelf and moves it to a private aisle away from the eyes of the other customers so he can try to fit it into the container. He sits in the container with his legs and arms pouring out. The fact that he is sizing up the container for a dead body is made all the more potent by the fact that this process has to take place in a common, public, domestic space.

Meanwhile, Walt is at Jesse’s house preparing to kill Krazy-8. He chooses against a gun and settles on a plastic bag to suffocate Krazy-8, a decision indicative of his desire to contain the violence—suffocation being less messy than a gunshot. He opens the door to the cellar and is shown in silhouette, khakis, button down shirt (his outfit from teaching earlier in the day) and a yellow plastic bag by his side. Although he has chosen against the revolver, the bag now hangs loosely at his side in the position one would expect to see a gun. He enters the basement ready to kill, but when Krazy-8 wakes up and begs for water, the part of Walt trying to be a killer (as he was in the desert) transforms into a father and caretaker who brings Krazy-8 water and a sandwich. The show highlights the awkward contrast between the caretaker role and the image of Krazy-8. Krazy-8’s neck is locked to a metal column in the basement and from the side of the frame items begin to slide toward Krazy-8: a water jug, another water jug, a sandwich on a plate with chips, a bucket (presumably to use for the bathroom) followed by toilet paper. The scene puts a fine point on the grotesque nature of this moment of overlap as the toilet paper falls slightly short of arm’s reach from Krazy-8 and he awkwardly reaches with his hand and foot with his neck uncomfortably bound by the bicycle lock. Finally, the camera cuts to Walt, who holds the final item, a bottle of hand sanitizer, which he then pushes across the concrete floor toward the would-be murder victim and drug distributor. Walt
imports the domestic behavior of being a caretaker and a father to this utterly non-domestic scene, simultaneously bringing violence into Jesse’s home and bringing humanity to a scene born from Walt’s savagery.

The contamination of Jesse’s house continues to an extreme. Jesse pulls the bagged body out of the RV and laboriously drags it upstairs, calling attention to his slowly decaying domestic space in an imagined dialogue between himself and Walt:

‘Let's go to your house, yo! Makes perfect sense. Let's completely screw up your house so you never wanna spend another night in it.’ ‘Sure. You know, why not?’…”And then, the killer in the basement? The one who's completely my responsibility? Hell, let's just let him live down there. Just, I don't know, make sure to feed him, like three times a day.’ ‘Sure, why not? That would be amazing. Thank you so much for the opportunity. I always dreamt about, I don't know, melting bodies.’

Jesse frequently expresses interest in keeping his home space separate from drug production, but despite Jesse’s frustration at the infiltration of his domestic space, the catastrophic reality of the violent frontier occurs moments later when the mostly dissolved corpse of Emilio falls through the upstairs floor and into the main hallway of Jesse’s house. The camera shows Jesse and Walt looking up through the dissolved base of the tub, smeared with blood and acid. Physically and figuratively Jesse’s house is marked by violence, forecasting that this frontier will be violent and unpredictable and will certainly not preserve the domestic space.

Ensley Guffey’s essay “Buying the House: Place in Breaking Bad” chronicles the use of spaces such as the various meth labs, Jesse’s house, and Walt’s house in the

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24 “Cat’s in the Bag,” Breaking Bad
series.25 As he explains, Jesse’s house is initially a connection to a healthier time for Jesse when he was caretaker for his aunt. Guffey notes that the house is largely untouched by Jesse’s décor, and that this is indicative of his desire to keep the house in the same state it was in when it provided him “safety and security.”26 Walt’s influence on Jesse has a negative impact on Jesse’s life, an impact metaphorically represented in the erosion of Jesse’s home.

Jesse’s psychological erosion is also played out metaphorically in his home space. When analyzing the murder of Krazy-8 and the disincorporation of the body, Guffey points out that according to phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard, “the basement,” the site of Krazy-8’s murder, “is a kind of special manifestation of the subconscious, and of nightmares.” Of course for Jesse, the violence he and Walt brought to his home is not contained in the basement and seeps uncontrollably through the house as Emilio’s body, mostly dissolved, melts through the floor. This is further of evidence of what Guffey claims signals “the rapidly growing influence of the chaotic and immoral over Jesse’s life—and his home.”27

Jesse’s house is representative of the inability of Walt and Jesse to contain evidence of their violence. Any action, domestic or wild, can occur in any space. After the hyper-violent murder scene in which Walt kills Krazy-8 by strangulation as Krazy-8 repeatedly stabs him in the leg with a piece of plate, the next images are of domestic goings on in Jesse’s neighborhood: birds chirp in the background, a man empties groceries from his trunk, a sprinkler waters a lawn, and two elderly ladies exercise across

27 Guffey, “Buying the House: Place in Breaking Bad” 158.
the street. Jesse looks around in shock at the calm neighborhood scene knowing the violence and horror that await him back in his house. He returns to his house, the RV emptied of the gear from the meth lab, his basement empty of Krazy-8, and only the bicycle lock set aside as a reminder of the savage murder in the basement in his home. This is not a frontier narrative in which the violence is justified or has a constructive quality.

*Rhetoric of Necessity and Walter White’s Empire of Innocence*

The result of a frontier narrative that denies the regenerative quality of violence, for *Breaking Bad*, is an antihero who does not have the qualities that justified the violence for classic Western anti-heroes. Painting violence with an acceptable veneer is not only a problem Vince Gilligan struggled with in the development of Walt’s character, but also a common theme in the ongoing conversation about the cultural history of the West. Again we can return to Patricia Limerick to understand some of the complex ways in which violent and abhorrent behavior has been historically justified.28

Limerick’s text, among many things, redefined the frontier conversation in a perhaps far too long anticipated direction that analyzed the impact of the American people on the frontier, rather than simply the frontier on the American people. Limerick explains that it was an occupied wilderness, and therefore necessarily needs to be

28 The use of “ideological overtones” to veil morally questionably behavior is a common part of the conversation about the American West. R. Philip Loy’s *Westerns in a Changing America: 1955-2000* explores the development of characters such as Jesse James and Billy the Kid as “populist heroes.” Loy explains that the fictional ideological overtones of the novels and cinema complicated the historical understanding of the frontier’s people—the myth overshadows the reality. Through narratives such as *Breaking Bad*, the frontier is a space for these same ideological processes to occur. Pioneers went west and committed atrocities to the native people and land but under the veil of manifest destiny found themselves not only justified in their pursuits but compelled to fulfill them.
analyzed in terms of conquest. Limerick’s concept of conquest is not simply one of a dominating force; her argument is complicated by frontier mythology, manifest destiny, and a historic reevaluation of the psyche of the pioneer. She describes the conqueror’s perceptions of themselves in terms of an “empire of innocence,” guided by an “innocence of intention.” Limerick argues that the pioneers did not knowingly or willingly conquer - they simply did what they thought they should do: “white Americans went west convinced that their purposes were as commonplace as they were innocent.”

Limerick believes that Turner, as well as the westering pioneers, either chose to ignore the conquest over native populations and the landscape, or believed so deeply in the myth and the drive of manifest destiny that they were convinced moving west and settling was simply part of the natural order of things. Limerick’s “empire of innocence” is thematically at work in Breaking Bad and helps elucidate the nature of Walt’s development.

Walt manages to do the unspeakable, lie and deceive his family, fail as a father, convince others to do equally heinous acts, and yet remain largely in the favor of fans of the show. As a protagonist, he fits into a role that makes audiences want him to succeed. Gilligan repeatedly tries to understand this phenomenon:

I have kind of lost sympathy for Walt along the way… I find it interesting, this sociological phenomenon, that people still root for Walt. Perhaps it says something about the nature of fiction that viewers have to identify on some level with the protagonist of the show, or maybe he's simply interesting because he is

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29 Limerick, The Legacy of Conquest.
30 Limerick, The Legacy of Conquest, 41.
31 Limerick, The Legacy of Conquest, 35-55.
good at what he does. Viewers respond to people who are good at their job, even when they are bad.\textsuperscript{33}

While this defines frontier antiheroes and how audiences tend to receive them, it is what Gilligan says next that defines Walt: “We needed an actor to play a character who was very dark and nasty but at the end of the hour you had to feel sorry for him.”\textsuperscript{34} Gilligan uses pity to keep a fan base for a questionable protagonist who is very good at doing bad things. Walt’s identity as a victim is, as it turns out, exactly how he keeps his family and other parts of his empire in control and how he justifies his behavior to himself. His diagnosis of cancer immediately defines him as a victim of a force far outside of his control. He is diagnosed in the pilot episode, the same episode in which we see him partner with a meth-using ex-student and convert an RV into a mobile meth lab using stolen equipment from his school. All of this behavior is justified under the purview of Walt’s victimization and innocent intentions. He is terminally ill and wants to provide money to his family before he dies.

Arguably until his final moments, Walt bases his actions on a false necessity; much to Skylar’s annoyance he iterates some version of “Everything I did, I did for this family” throughout the series. Walt’s rationalization muddies the space between tyrannical villain and loving father. He loves his family, as evidenced by the panicked kidnapping of his daughter in the final season, and his attempts to be a father to Walt Jr., but the complications arise in the type of father Walt wants to be. He craves admiration as a provider and protector of his wife and children but is willing to place them at great risk to achieve that admiration. This contradiction cannot be sustained. The decisions he

\textsuperscript{33} Plunkett. “Breaking Bad creator Vince Gilligan: ‘How long can anyone stay at the top?’”

\textsuperscript{34} Plunkett. “Breaking Bad creator Vince Gilligan: ‘How long can anyone stay at the top?’”
makes that put his family in danger are veiled in a rhetoric of necessity which he uses to justify his actions when he believes, at times, he has no choice.\textsuperscript{35} Walt’s likeability relies, partly, on an innocence of intention that hearkens back to Limerick’s critique of the idealistic view of early westering pioneers. Gilligan himself expresses this conflict in Walt:

He is an extremely self-deluded man. We always say in the writers’ room, if Walter White has a true superpower, it’s not his knowledge of chemistry or his intellect; it’s his ability to lie to himself. He is the world’s greatest liar. He could lie to the pope. He could lie to Mother Teresa. He certainly could lie to his family, and he can lie to himself, and he can make these lies stick. He can make himself believe, in the face of all contrary evidence, that he is still a good man. It really does feel to us like a natural progression down this road to hell, which was originally paved with good intentions.\textsuperscript{36}

Throughout the series there is an evolution of what Walt perceives as necessary and how he uses the concept of necessity to influence others. By perceiving himself as a victim, Walt places himself as a victim of circumstance, a circumstance for which he does not take responsibility. By lying to himself in this way, he does not, at least initially, perceive himself as a conqueror, intruder, or villain. Limerick’s descriptions of the innocent victimhood of the pioneers could be describing Walter White: “Even though they were trespassers, westering Americans were hardly, in their own eyes, criminals; rather, they

\textsuperscript{35} This is a piece of what Carlo Nardi explores (Carlo Nardi, “Liquid identification in \textit{Breaking Bad}” in \textit{Breaking Bad: Critical Essays on the Contexts, Politics, Style, and Reception of the Television Series}, ed. P. David Pierson (New York: Lexington Books, 2014). He explores the likeability of Walt as an antihero and argues “the discomfort of helplessly watching unpleasant facets of Walt’s personality and the catastrophic consequences of his actions might cause moral dissonance and problematize identification processes in the viewer.” Nardi does not explore the western underpinnings of Walt’s character and his capacity to elicit the viewer’s sympathy.

were pioneers...Innocence of intention placed the course of things in a bright and positive light; only over time would the shadows compete for our attention.”

In *Breaking Bad*, the shadows immediately compete for our attention. While Walt may believe that cooking meth is necessary and paint it in a positive light because he is providing money to his family, the trail of violence and horror he leaves is always present: in the pilot episode he maniacally drives with two dead bodies in his RV (his victims), one which Jesse ends up melting in hydrofluoric acid in a bathtub; in season three he runs over two drug dealers in the street to save Jesse’s life; in season four he blows up an ex-cartel member and Gus Fring with a suicide bomber in a home for the elderly; and he consistently lies and deceives his wife and son. In this way, *Breaking Bad* is a frontier narrative that revises the empire of innocence by denying Walt the ability to justify violence with innocent intentions. Walt’s willingness to ignore and hide the dark motives behind his actions comes to a head when, in the final episode, the show offers a moment of lucidity and clarity (which perhaps puts an all too neat bow on the show’s ending) between Walt and his wife Skylar where he admits that he enjoyed the power. He ceases his argument that everything he has done, he has done exclusively and necessarily for his family. In the final episode, Walt confesses to Skylar what has been true throughout the entire series—that he likes the power and that he may not have acted for the best interest of his family:

Walt: Skyler. All the things that I did, you need to understand...
Skylar: If I have to hear one more time that you did this for the family…
Walt: I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it…I was alive.

37 Limerick *The Legacy of Conquest* 36
38 “Pilot,”; “Half Measures,”; “Face Off”
39 “Felina”
In order to create a character who does unspeakably violent things to everyone around him, but generates sympathy from the audience, Gilligan has Walt treat his participation in the meth trade as an inevitable outcome of life events. Yet Gilligan reminds us that in the fourth episode Walt is offered a solution to his seemingly impossible problem that he turns down:

Walt has a chance to be a man in the fourth episode of the first season, when his former business partners offer to pay for his chemotherapy treatments. He's offered a way out that doesn't involve being a criminal, doesn't put his family at risk and doesn't break the law. In this deus ex machina moment, he gets offered an out; but in his mind, it means eating a little humble pie by accepting money from people he feels betrayed him. He turns down their offer for reasons of ego. He basically says, ‘No, I'd rather cook crystal meth than take this free money.’

Prior to this moment, while his actions were not excusable, they seem compelled by circumstance. He wants to provide for his family and has an accelerated timeline due to his grim diagnosis in which he wants to build wealth to leave to his family. This desire fits the norms of his society. He is dying and the mounting bills seem to leave him no choice. If his motives were entirely to pay for his treatment and provide for his family, the series would have come to a rapid close with his acceptance of the help from his ex-partner. Instead, the alternative driving motives behind Walt’s decisions begin to surface and define his transformation. He wants power over his life and death that is in proportion to his ability to cook meth and build an empire.

The series provides a catalogue of moments when Walt chooses to re-enter the world of meth production despite the absence of any real necessity: Once his cancer is in remission and the necessity of having to make money recedes, he chooses to continue; once he is out of the industry, Gus brings him into the super-lab and convinces him to

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cook by leaning on Walt’s insecurities as a man; once he has so much money that Skylar can no longer launder it, he continues to cook. In fact, in the fifth season episode “Gliding Over All,” Skylar calls this to attention. At this point she has been persuaded to help Walt by laundering the vast amount of wealth he has accrued, another act of necessity as she feels she must intervene to keep her family safe. She takes Walt on a drive to a storage unit where she has kept the money she cannot launder:

Walt: How much is this?
Skylar: I have no earthly idea, I truly don’t. There is more money here than I could spend in ten lifetimes. I certainly can’t launder it…Walt I want my kids back. I want my life back. Please tell me how much is enough? How big does this pile have to be?

In the beginning of the series Walt has to justify his behavior to himself, but as the show develops he must justify it to others. His first murder in the RV is conceptually defensible because he is under immediate threat. Framing Walt’s violence in this way invites comparison to other modern television antiheroes like Tony Soprano whom Brett Martin describes as a character whose violence, initially in the series, had to be carefully strategized. In both cases, the shows work to justify murder so that the audience does not see the protagonist as a senseless villain. In Breaking Bad, the second murder of Krazy-8 is utterly different from the first. Walt makes a list to weigh his options, a comically humane method for considering the much heavier and complicated decision of murder. While his list to let Krazy-8 live is much longer, the one item on the side arguing for the

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41 “4 Days Out”; “Más”; “Gliding Over All.”
42 “Gliding Over All”
44 Linda Holmes does a similar but less extensive analysis of this murder in her article cataloguing the effects of each murder in the show (Linda Holmes, NPR.org, “Death And Walter White,” 3 August 2013, http://www.npr.org/blogs/monkeysee/2013/08/03/208599847/death-and-walter-white). Her point is also that the murder of Krazy-8 is different, but her primary purpose is to look at how each murder sets Breaking Bad apart from how other shows such as The Wire deal with murder and death.
murder is “He’ll kill your entire family if you let him go.” This argument is not enough to convince Walt to murder and we get the idea that he may release Krazy-8. Things change, however, when Walt finds a missing piece of plate that allows him to believe he is under a direct threat from Krazy-8—murder becomes a necessity, but a necessity he creates. The threat is of course coming from a man who is defenselessly locked to a pole, and thus a complete fabrication. On the one hand, Krazy-8 represents a threat to Walt’s survival, but on the other hand, that threat depends on Walt’s invention.

The justification for each murder, and the evolution of the destruction after each murder, elucidate much about Walt and Jesse’s characters as they confront a frontier in which they cannot possibly contain the violence or justify it innocently. In her analysis of the catalogue of murders that Jesse and Walt commit, Linda Holmes tracks the development of Walt and Jesse through the lens of murder. She notes, “Walt will sit with his conscience again and again, and he will find its leaky valves again and again, and he will give himself permission to ignore it, then conclude it's a weakness, then stop hearing it speak at all.” Alongside this observation she briefly notes the detriment that the murders have on Jesse. Walt emotionally masters the fallout of his murderous conquest in a way that Jesse is never able to. Holmes’ concludes that “one of the many reasons Breaking Bad will be remembered the way it will, eulogized the way it will, and missed the way it will is that its killings always mean something. This is a universe in

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45 “…And the Bag’s in the River”
46 Linda Holmes, “Death and Walter White”
47 Linda Holmes, “Death and Walter White”
48 Walt’s murderous trail includes but is not limited to the moments he is able to: convince Jesse to kill Gale, allow Jane to die before his eyes as she lay next to Jesse, kill two drug dealers to save Jesse’s life, nearly kill a child with poison to play Jesse onto his side, and blow up an ex-Mexican drug cartel kingpin (Hector Salamanca) to kill Gus Fring.
which killing a person changes you. It matters, always.\textsuperscript{49} While Holmes mentions how each murder means something in the show, she does not analyze the impact on Walt in much detail, or consider what more rightly could be argued is his empowerment through murder. There is an inverse evolution in Walt with murder. What is most haunting about this idea is that in the world of \textit{Breaking Bad}, and specifically in the case of Walter White, killing a person will change you, but it might not change you in the way that it ought to.

The impact death and murder have on Jesse acts as a foil to Walt’s transformation. For Walt, murder is an empowering choice he makes on his maniacal quest to build an empire; for Jesse, each death erodes his life. While the nature of the murders change as the show progresses, for Walt, a rhetorical use of necessity remains constant. Unlike Walt’s murder of Krazy-8, when Jesse is confronted with the murder of a relative innocent like Gale, the meth-lab technician who Walt convinces Jesse he has to kill, he is dramatically affected in a way that audiences will find much more human.\textsuperscript{50} Committing murder does not bother Walt, but causes Jesse to spin utterly out of control.

One such death that has an indelible mark on Jesse’s character is the death of his girlfriend Jane, a girl who represents a productive move away from the drug world for Jesse and toward domesticity. Jane is the first person in whom Jesse finds a positive loving relationship. Jesse blames himself for her fatal heroin overdose, a death that Walt watches happen and in which he chooses not to intervene.\textsuperscript{51} Subsequently, Jesse blames himself for the death of airline passengers who died because of Jane’s father’s mistake as an air traffic controller. He carries a false guilt, a guilt that rightfully belongs to Walt, but for Jesse the responsibility lies on his shoulders alone. While Walt chooses to allow

\textsuperscript{49} Linda Holmes, “Death and Walter White”

\textsuperscript{50} See generally “Full Measure” and Jesse’s fallout in the following fourth season.

\textsuperscript{51} “Phoenix”
Jane’s death and believes it was a necessary decision for himself and his empire, Jesse is crushed by the weight of it.

After the murder of Gus Fring, again the show presents a difference between how Jesse and Walt justify, and therefore contain, their violence. Late in the third season, Jesse has been desperately worried about Brock, the boy Walt poisoned as leverage to convince Jesse that Gus Fring needed to die. Here necessity is a means of control for Walt. Walt believes that he needs to kill Gus to save his own life and the life of his family. To complete this murder, Walt poisons a child, Brock, to whom Jesse is attached, thereby motivating Jesse toward vengeance. Although the initial plan fails, Walt ultimately does succeed in having Gus killed. When Jesse finds out that Gus did not poison Brock he questions Walt’s motives:

Jesse: So Gus didn't poison him after all. Still, he--he had to go, right?
Walt: You're damn right. Gus had to go.52

Jesse is concerned with their choice to blame Gus for a crime he did not commit, but Walt allays his doubt by validating the false necessity surrounding the murder: “Gus had to go.” While, for Walt, Gus had to go, for Jesse, Gus may not have had to go. The rhetoric of necessity surrounding the murder of Gus Fring is composed of justifications that pertain to Walt’s ability to veil violence in innocence and necessity. His repeated use of the concept of “having to do something” places him in a rhetorically passive position, that of a victim of circumstance. He exploits the rhetoric of necessity to control the various pawns in his empire and self-victimizes to accomplish his goal of conquest but also to remain innocent.

52 “Face Off”
While the murders of Gus Fring and Gale Boetticar nearly destroy Jesse and his attempts at healthy relationships, they seem to catalyze Walt’s energy and desire for power. As Jesse returns to Andrea and Brock, a woman and her child who represent a second movement toward a healthy domestic relationship for Jesse, Walt calls Skylar and moves further away from his family, cherishing his conquest:

Skylar: Walt?
Walt: How are you doing?
Skylar: How am I doing? How are you doing?
Walt: I'm, uh...I'm doing quite well. I'm good.
Skylar: Jesus, Walt, the news here. Gus Fring is dead. He was blown up along with some person from some Mexican cartel, and the DEA has no idea what to make of it. Do you know about this? Walt? I need you to--
Walt: It's over. We're safe.
Skylar: Was this you? What happened?
Walt: I won.53

After he claims victory he hangs up the phone. As he passes Gus’ car in the parking garage he smirks with satisfaction. The camera then reveals the Lily of the Valley plant in Walt’s backyard leaving no doubt around the question of what happened to Brock. His satisfaction for having committed violent murder and successfully poisoning a boy makes his obvious lie “It’s over” even more foul. Not only is this not over, it is far worse than the audience could have imagined. He is happy that his grab for power was successful and that he was also able to keep his family safe—once again Walt is regenerated through violence but also by his ability to serve as protector of his family.54 This is a violence that incidentally further emotionally distances his wife from him. While he physically protects his family from danger, he has exerted great emotional violence on them because he rescues them from danger that he has created.

53 “Face Off”
54 This refers to Slotkin’s thesis of cultural and personal regeneration through violence in the mythology of the American west.
Walt’s evolution from protagonist to potential villain is marked by reactions in which he changes or evolves from each death in ways that are decreasingly human—symbols of his inability to veil the violence in innocence and of the increasingly dark intentions he has. When Walt endangers his brother in law Hank, he calls Jesse and we see the same motif: Jesse coping with the past and Walt pushing forward, unaffected by the past. Jesse tells Walt that he is currently broke, but Walt’s concern is selfish and driven by a desire to keep producing meth:

Jesse: The plan worked. They bought it. I got bills due, man. I'm screwed.
Walt: Did he mention my name?
Jesse: No. Thanks for caring.
Walt: What about the basement?
Jesse: It's clean.
Walt: And the RV?
Jesse: Badger's cousin took it to his garage. It's safe.
Walt: Can he get it running again?
Jesse: Why?
Walt: So we can cook.
Jesse: So you still wanna cook? Seriously?
Walt: What's changed, Jesse?55

Walt says that nothing has changed because he has to believe that it is still necessary for him to cook. If providing for his family is the innocent intention that he uses to justify his violence, then endangering his brother in law and nearly being killed in the desert by a major drug trafficker might cause him to hesitate in his plan to move forward; he might hesitate as Jesse does. He responds to Jesse’s doubt about more meth production with the troubling question, “What’s changed, Jesse?” The answer to this question for everyone except Walt is “a lot.” The endangerment of his family does not affect his drive to cook because he believes that he is protecting them by necessarily growing his empire. His empire and the violence it necessitates are actually the forces destroying the very family

55“Bit by a Dead Bee”
he claims to protect. For Walt, nothing has changed: he remains the protector of his family as well as the sole individual able to venture out into a savage world of drug production and provide for them. He has pulled his family into a world where they are both subjected to constant threat and dependent on him for protection.

Violence and the Contamination of the House

As Walt gets deeper into the drug empire, his relationship with the architectural space of his home becomes less traditional as the demands of his criminal activity pressure him to use his home for behaviors utterly non-domestic. Starting in the pilot episode, Walt hides evidence of his criminal activity in his home. The secrecy in the home begins in the nursery, metaphorically aligning with his desire to provide for his family, as well as his inability to keep his domestic space safe. He dries chemical and blood soaked money in his clothes dryer, and hides it in the heat vent in the nursery. Once makes too much money for the dryer vent, he moves his money into the walls of his garage, and eventually, once Skylar has joined him in his criminal ventures, he hides bags of money in the space beneath his house. As his drug empire demands more from him, instead of changing his relationship with crime to save his family, he becomes more poisonous toward his domestic space. Walt’s violent nature poisons the physical aspect of his home so much that it becomes a space in which his identity is not resident, but intruder.

In one such moment, Walt brings a gun into his home in order to protect himself from Tuco Salamanca, a wildly unpredictable and violent drug distributor. He walks into his house holding the gun while his pregnant wife bathes in the tub, and after running to

56 “Pilot”
57 “Phoenix”
the heat vent and grabbing all of his cash, he hides the cash and his gun in a diaper box nearby.\textsuperscript{58} The nursery, far from a place of peace for the newborn, becomes a private space where Walt hopes to keep secrets from his family. As he is hiding the cash and the weapon in his daughters’ diaper box, Jesse’s car arrives with Jesse at gunpoint and Tuco in the backseat, reminding the audience that it is the drug empire that has transformed Walt’s home.

The second season is marked by episodes of reentry into the domestic space, each moment irrevocably damaging his family. This damage is played out with the material architecture of the house. After narrowly escaping from Tuco in the desert, Walt attributes his absence to a “fugue state”—a period of complete memory loss. When he reenters the domestic sphere, he is no longer a husband or father, but rather a criminal and prisoner. He secretly enters his home to retain the hidden gun and cash from his daughter’s nursery, sneaking into the house at night as an intruder would. He watches as his son meets his wife in the kitchen and they share an intensely personal moment from which he is absent as a father. Walt then returns to the hospital and glances up at the painting in the room which depicts a man on a boat rowing away from the shore where his wife and daughter stand waving.\textsuperscript{59} In this rare moment, Walt takes the time to consider the effects of his choices on the domestic space without being blinded by the fear, greed, and power that have descended upon his personality. His re-entry from the wilderness marks a shift in his domestic space given the severe nature of his immersion into the wilderness.

\textsuperscript{58} “Bit by a Dead Bee”
\textsuperscript{59} “Bit by a Dead Bee”
A second moment of re-entry begins with Walt and Jesse escaping deep into the desert to spend four days cooking meth. The RV dies and they have no communication, limited resources, and over a million dollars worth of meth. They are in a space that is private enough for production, but is so remote that the space overwhelms them. Walt gives in to death, and begins to lament his decisions, insisting that he deserves to die. When confronted with the isolation of the vast desert, Walt passively buckles at the enormity of the problem and level of exposure in the desert. The space dwarfs the RV and meth cooking operation. Luckily, using Walt’s knowledge of chemistry they are able to construct a makeshift battery charger that allows them to escape the desert. They do not tame the wilderness in which they stand, but instead control nature barely enough to ensure survival.

This is a unique moment in the show because Walt and Jesse have cooked so much meth that the wilderness does not immediately demand their attention, and the show takes an episode to explore how Walt operates in his domestic space upon reentry from this epic experience in the desert. The result is Walt in a state of unrest; he behaves as a caged prisoner, but one who must exert change and power over his house. Walt begins by replacing the water heater, trying to fix the physical house and improve the space of the home, while of course further neglecting the needs of his family. He discovers rotten wood on the floor of the closet that quickly escalates into him replacing and repairing most of the underside of the house. The house is a space that needs to be “fixed” and improved. It’s as if Walt believes that he can root out and repair all of the dysfunction that he has introduced. The crawl space beneath the house turns into a place to stash bags of money. The physical domestic space is no longer a space where he is
trying to build a family, but more a space that allows for his wilderness behavior.

By the fifth season the house has become an abandoned wasteland for vandals and skateboarders who use the empty swimming pool as a skate park.\textsuperscript{60} The house is surrounded by chain link fence and police tape. On the wall of his living room in bright yellow is painted the word “Heisenberg,” a symbolic mark on the home evoking the violence his alter ego brought to his family. The walls are destroyed while trash and filth cover the floors. Appropriately, he is there to get the pill-sized portion of Ricin, a highly poisonous chemical he creates and uses twice in the series, that he has hidden behind an outlet cover in what used to be his bedroom. In this final moment in the White home, the space is abandoned, ruined, and stands as a permanent scar in the quiet Albuquerque suburb. A once idealistic starter home in which Walt and Skylar dreamt of raising their family is indelibly destroyed by Walt’s violence, and its final purpose for Walt is as a hiding place for a deathly poison.

\textit{Violence at Home or Domestic Violence}

As previously suggested, Walt’s behavior in the borderlands systematically contaminates his relationship with Skylar. This idea befits a frontier narrative trope that Handley explains: “Violence between familiars in these novels compels us to rethink the binary of savagery and civilization upon which Manifest Destiny and Turner’s historiography relied in order to justify Western conquest.”\textsuperscript{61} In \textit{Breaking Bad}, violence

\textsuperscript{60}“Blood Money”\textsuperscript{61}

\cite{Handley} Handley, \textit{Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West}, 7. Handley further categorizes this violence as “perhaps the most unexpected thing we find at home in the west.”\textsuperscript{61} While in the formula Western, Handley explains, violence is most often between whites and Indians, there is much textual evidence that denies this concept of violence in the west.\textsuperscript{61} The result of violence at home, or violence between familiars is that in novels by writers like Zane Grey, “the ethnic and religious differences that seem to structure his novels increasingly blur, to the point that enemies and families, strangers and lovers become difficult to distinguish meaningfully according to group identity.”\textsuperscript{61} Handley takes issue with
with familiars, both physical and emotional, is a key driving force behind the dissolution of Walt’s family. This violence begins on a small scale, but amplifies as the series progresses. Early in the series at an ultrasound appointment, Skylar calls Walt out about his lack of communication: “you are gone all night and don’t tell me where you’ve been.” In his response, he again calls attention to his two conflicting personalities and quickly resorts to aggression: “I haven’t been myself, but I love you, nothing about that has changed, and it never will, so right now, what I need, is for you to climb down out of my ass. Can you do that? Will you do that for me honey? Will you please, just once, get off my ass? I would appreciate it, I really would.”

His tone here is complicated by his desire to assert himself without directly damaging his relationship with Skylar. He speaks in a tone that is not full of the confidence he has in the desert, but is instead tempered by a desire to contain the anger born in the wilderness.

While Walt and Skylar’s marriage is complicated throughout the show, in the first two seasons the show present a slowly dissolving relationship. Their relationship falls apart as Walt fails to fulfill his role as husband in the domestic space. This dissolution is represented through Skylar’s frustration with Walt, her affair with Ted Beneke, Walt’s lies, and Skylar’s insistent demands that he communicate with her—demands he does not obey. Walt’s need to feel the power he has while cooking meth forces the domestic space to begin to dissolve.

Walt and Skylar’s sexual relationship serves as one the most salient reminders of the impact of Walt’s violence. Walt and Skylar only have sex four times in the series and Gilligan uses each time as an opportunity to show the strange domestic transformation

the reliance on the myth of the masculine individual when “the idea of the masculine individual who thrives out West has had a longer cultural life that his actual, brief history.”

62 “The Cat’s in the Bag…”
and destruction. While he is simultaneously killing people in the underground meth world, he is also exerting extreme “violence on familiars” at home.

In the pilot episode Walt returns home after his cook and it is clear that Skylar is uncomfortable with his lack of communication. Instead of talking to Skylar, however, Walt has sex with her in a surprisingly aggressive way. After they have sex, he walks to the bathroom and passes out on the bathroom floor where he sleeps until the morning. From this moment on there is a sense that no matter the sexual relationship between Walt and Skylar prior to his moment, it is most certainly going to be something different now. He does not sleep next to her throughout the night in the place he is expected to be as a husband, but instead lies on the bathroom floor unconscious from a coughing fit traceable to his (at this point) secret lung cancer.

The next time Skylar and Walt have sex is in a moment motivated by illegal behavior. At a PTA meeting, Walt clearly looks bored and fed up with the concerned parents. Sitting in a crowd of people as a criminal whom no one suspects, he begins to rub Skylar’s leg in the middle of the room. As the other parents complain about the fears and difficulties in the school, Walt and Skylar have a sexual moment together. He not only disregards the fact that a janitor has been fired for a crime Walt committed, he is actually sexually aroused by having gotten away with something. As he becomes less willing to abide by the rules that are impressed upon him, he becomes more able to impress his own laws on the environment around him. He does what he wants. He and Skylar leave and have sex in the car after the meeting. Skylar says to Walt: “where did

63 The moments of complicated intimacy are: after Walt returns from the first cook at the end of the pilot episode, in their car outside of the high school after Walt becomes unexpectedly aroused during a PTA meeting, when Walt comes to the house wearing the Heisenberg hat and forces himself on Skylar in a way that evokes rape, and finally, in a moment of false intimacy, when Skylar misinterprets a desperate phone message from Walt as his behaving affectionately.
that come from and why was it so damn good?” to which Walt replies “because it was illegal.”64 Walt is motivated and inspired by his illegal behavior and sexually aroused by the illegality and power. While this sexual moment was consensual, it was most certainly not within Walt’s domestic norm before cooking meth. Their sex life is being transformed by his time in the wilderness into something completely dictated by Walt’s desire and prompted by his enjoyment of power and crime.

The violence Walt brings home in the first season culminates in a moment of sexual aggression toward Skylar in the kitchen of their home. This comes in a heightened moment of juxtaposition and overlap of the two worlds that complicates the sexual encounter. Walt and Jesse make a trade with Tuco in the junkyard, and due to a short altercation, Tuco beats his employee to death. Walt and Jesse are disgusted and terrified by the sheer surprise and volatility of the violence. They return to the car and Walt calculates exactly how much money he needs to provide for his family before he can get out of the business—$737,000. Confronted with this violence he seems scared by the brutality of the drug economy. At this point he naïvely believes that the wilderness and domestic spaces are separate; he believes he will be able to go to the wilderness and return to the domestic without the contamination of the latter.

The show cuts directly from them leaving a dead body in the junkyard, to Skylar rubbing lotion on her pregnant stomach. This juxtaposition places the ultra-violent and unpredictable wilderness next to icons of the domestic sphere. Walt comes home and Skylar repeatedly says his name as she walks out of the bathroom wearing a robe and a facial mask. She walks to the living room where Walt clicks through the stations on the

64 “A No-Rough-Stuff-Type Deal
television, still wearing his Heisenberg hat. It is clear that he cannot hear her because he is still shocked by the violence. Skylar touches him and they have a short exchange where she mentions his hat. After she offers to make him something to eat, he turns off the television, takes off his hat, and walks to the kitchen where she is preparing lunch. She asks him “where have you been?” to which he does not reply, but walks up behind her with what appears to be tears in his eyes, seeking to be consoled as he puts his head on her shoulder. He begins to cry and, hugging her from behind, transitions from needing consolation to starting a sexual encounter. Skylar initially seems interested and almost humorously curious at his sexual excitement. The scene quickly turns dark, however, and the encounter ends with Skylar, bent over, hitting her head against the refrigerator and yelling “Stop it!” at which point Walt finally relents with a look of complete horror on his face. He is ashamed and walks out of the house. Skylar comes to him as he weeps and says, “I know you’re scared and you’re angry and you’re frustrated, and I know none of this is fair. But you cannot take it out on me.”

Immediately after she says this we hear Walt Jr. say “Hey I’m home, and he walks into the house to see the kitchen in disarray and the mark of Skylar’s facial lotion smeared on the fridge.

Walt’s range of emotions, combined with the complicated framing of this scene with the encounter with Tuco in the junkyard foreground the effects of the modern frontier on the protagonist. It seems that he is almost aware that his behavior is not acceptable, and given the emotions ranging from fear and weeping to sexual aggression and deflated embarrassment, Walt is clearly a protagonist who is overwhelmed by the overlap of these two worlds. When confronted with the violence in the wilderness his

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65 Seven-Thirty Seven
reaction is to decide on an exit plan, but as he enters the domestic space, the domestic space he purportedly is attempting to save, he fails to behave in a way that will preserve that space. The wilderness and violence change him and overlap into his home space at the constant detriment of the domestic. He can no longer fulfill his role as husband because he has been altered by the violent wilderness, a violence that does not restore his family, but destroys it.
CHAPTER II

BREAKING BAD’S CULTURAL MOMENT: A CRISIS OF MASCULINITY AND THE AMERICAN EMPIRE

Amanda Marcotte’s article “How to Make a Critically Acclaimed TV Show About Masculinity” catalogues the recent trend in television shows exploring masculinity. She argues the trend is to focus on “modern man struggling with the limitations of his outlook in a world full of complexity and changes that prevent survival through simple reliance on old gender norms.” She places *Breaking Bad* in this tradition, but explains that the series sets itself apart from shows like *Mad Men* and *The Sopranos* by not having the protagonist begin as a traditionally masculine figure like the business advertising tycoon Don Draper or the iconic Mafioso Tony Soprano. Instead, Walt begins as the opposite—an emasculated sickly man who cannot fulfill his role as husband, father, or provider in a way that he sees fit—and spends the series fighting his way toward a traditional image of manhood.

Walt’s choices are often motivated by the masculine power he commands as his violent alter ego Heisenberg. The myth of the frontier hero has always lived in the imagination, but it becomes real through characters like Walt who embrace the ideals of that myth—violence, masculinity, progress, and conquest. *Breaking Bad* looks at how the myth of the frontier hero shapes the modern psychological landscape. The role of myth in

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67 Marcotte “How to Make a Critically Acclaimed TV Show About Masculinity”

68 Marcotte “How to Make a Critically Acclaimed TV Show About Masculinity”
Breaking Bad is evident in Walt’s perceptions of his actions and how the Mexican drug cartels and the D.E.A see Heisenberg. The show puts Walter White, the man, in direct comparison with Heisenberg, the myth. He is simultaneously a high school teacher, father, husband, murderer, and burgeoning drug kingpin. Heisenberg is even mythologized in song, and gives Walt a gravitas that he utterly lacks in his non-drug manufacturing existence.\textsuperscript{69} He uses the pseudonym and the myth to his advantage, but in the end his pursuit of the myth and its ultimate failure offer an exploration of the impact of the myth of the frontier as well as the erosion of that myth in a modern landscape.

The Hat and the Gun: Walt and Mythic Masculinity

While much of the series invokes common visual tropes of the Western, most essential to the development of the character are the use Heisenberg’s hat and the development of Walt as a gunslinger. The hat he wears as Heisenberg at once summons Western imagery and calls forth the impact the mythic Western hero has on Walt. Cowboy hats play an essential role in the cinematography of the western—cutting the frame in iconic close-ups in Sergio Leone’s The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly—and also serve a very pragmatic purpose for the heroes in the Western—it keeps them from being exposed in the harsh landscape of the frontier. In the epic final three-way shootout in The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly, the montage consists of close-ups where each man’s hat cuts the top of the frame and their eyes peer beneath the brim menacingly. In addition to being part of the visual tradition, the hat serves another purpose. At one point in the film, Blondie (Clint Eastwood) loses his hat as Tuco (Eli Wallach) takes him into the desert. This marks a moment of exposure and allows for him to appear much more vulnerable.

\textsuperscript{69} “Negro y Azul”
Stripped of his gun and his hat, he walks through the desert as a disempowered version of himself. The hat, for Walt, serves to give him confidence. He relies on the hat to summon the confidence of a classic Western gunslinger and by doing so makes the myth of the individual cowboy central in his development into Heisenberg.

*Breaking Bad* does not belong to the Outlaw anti-hero tradition of the Western but it relies on the archetype of the outlaw who has a clear place in the Western. In the episode “Full Measure,” certain scenes transport us to the Western film tradition by using Western iconography. The episode opens with a flashback of Walt and Skylar looking at their house as a young couple far before Walt cooked meth. This moment serves to set up the construction of their family as a frame to the narrative we already know. While many of the Westerns discussed earlier begin with some amount of family unity (*Once Upon a Time in the West, Unforgiven, High Noon, The Searchers*) similarly, in this flashback, the family unit is unbroken. After the flashback, we see Walt sitting in his car in the desert waiting to meet Gus – he watches as a car peaks over the horizon. He puts on his hat and walks across the high plane. The camera tracks behind him and visually we are transported to a Western film. Various plateaus and the Sandia Mountains make up the distant horizon. He walks up to meet Mike, a hit man and Gus’ employee, and they step into frame from either side, summoning the visual rhetoric of an Old-West shootout. The silhouette of his hat on a far off horizon alone owes its visual history to the Western.

The series is careful to deny the idea that Heisenberg, or the personality traits within Walt that surface as he is playing that part, can be turned on and off with the use of the hat. His iconic Pork-Pie hat makes an appearance in the first episode of the second season when Walt and Jesse are meeting the unpredictable and hyper-violent Tuco
Salamanca (a name with a likely allusion to Eli Wallach’s character Tuco in *The Good, the Bad, and The Ugly*) in a junkyard. Walt has adopted the pseudonym Heisenberg in the drug world and already has begun to gain some fame, and in this scene the hat enters the visual language to represent his transformation. Immediately following a murder in the junkyard, Walt wears the hat home and Skylar comments on it. He removes the hat, the visual representation of Heisenberg and the violence we associate with the world in which Heisenberg participates, but his attack on Skylar as described earlier shows that Walt does not leave the violence with the hat. He goes to Skylar and sexually attacks her in the kitchen. While the hat does help Walt gain the confidence to behave as a more extreme version of himself, it is clear that the violence is within Walt and born from a desire to fulfill a masculine ideal of the frontier hero. Summoning the myth of the John Wayne archetype, he believes the hat gives him confidence, power, and the ability to commit acts of violence. In this early use of the hat it both defies use as a traditional image of the independent man, and denies the classic frontier role of the independent loner as a force that restores the family.

The hat takes on a mystical quality as it motivates moments of extreme confidence or violence within Walt, as if he is using the hat to connect himself to the myth of the Western hero. In episode “Fifty One,” an episode marking a year after his grim diagnoses of cancer and using his birthday as a marking point to showcase his transformation and the dissolution of his family, the hat comes back to transform Walt’s behavior. He sells his car, the Aztek, to a mechanic for $50. This SUV has operated as an iconic image that visually kept Walt as a father figure or a family man. He sells the car,
but reaches into the back seat and takes his hat. He then buys himself and Walt Jr. sports cars.\textsuperscript{70} The hat allows him to embrace the type of independent masculinity he desires.

In the fourth season, Walt’s failed transformation into the mythic Western hero is furthered with a movement toward being a gunslinger. If the hat gives him confidence by making him feel as if he can play the part of a John Wayne or Clint Eastwood style hero, then the gun would, psychologically for Walt, complete the package. Everything about the acquisition of the weapon denies his ability to play that role. When he buys an illegal gun, he looks uncomfortable and awkward with the weapons and it is evident that he does not know much about guns. The gun salesmen calls attention to Walt’s ignorance about weapons only furthering Walt’s inability to have the masculine identity and power of an archetypal John Wayne style protagonist:

\begin{quote}
General rule--You don't want to cross draw, not unless you're going to be sitting, you know, store clerks, card gamers and such. Either way you're going to want to practice your draw...a lot...because if you're all fingers, well, it might could be him keeping a piece instead of you. Catch my drift?\textsuperscript{71}
\end{quote}

Complete with hat and gun, the series denies Walt the successful transformation into the myth he is attempting to replicate. Walt goes to Gus’ house to kill him and, sans hat, sits nervously in his car looking at Gus’ house. As he puts the hat on, there is an obvious transformation. He takes on his signature Heisenberg grimace and seems to brim with confidence as the hat cuts the top of the frame and Walt menacingly stares directly at the camera. With his concealed 38 snub nose wheel gun he walks toward Gus’ house intent to kill. For a brief moment, in the middle of a suburban area of Albuquerque the camera tracks behind Walt over his shoulder. The frame, like Walt’s state of mind, is narrowly

\textsuperscript{70} “Fifty One”
\textsuperscript{71} “Thirty-Eight Snub Nose”
focused. Walt, of course, is not a lone gunman with a single mission, and the show once again denies the hat as a vehicle to completely transform Walt. It has transformative qualities, but it does not allow him to escape entirely. Mike calls Walt and tells him to go home. Walt stops an assassination attempt to answer his cell phone—a behavior that denies a transformation into a lone gunman. As he takes the call, the camera cuts out to a much wider shot, revealing Walt, awkwardly standing in an intersection looking around for Mike. The visual language breaks from that of Western cinema because while Walt is a frontier protagonist and speaks to that tradition, the show denies his complete submersion into the myth of the individual violent gunslinger. Walt can neither inhabit the identity of the gunslinger convincingly nor can he shed it entirely in the tradition of the family-Western.

Myth of Manhood: Masculinity, Fatherhood, and The Role of the Provider

Brian Faucette explores the “cultural fear” about masculinity in Breaking Bad as a “crisis of conscious and perceived crisis of masculinity.” He argues Walt’s transformation is defined by the two types of masculinity that creator Vince Gilligan put forth. Gilligan explains that with Walt, he wanted to show the transformation from “Mr. Chips to Scarface.” If masculinity in the Western has always been tied to a cultural or political moment of change as theorists repeatedly claim, then Michael Kimmel’s 2013

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72 Faucette, “Taking Control: Male Angst and Re-Emergence of Hegemonic Masculinity in Breaking Bad,” 73-74. This is a transformation from a passive, smart, sensitive father figure into a violent and intimidating male role. The crisis of masculinity Faucette describes in America is one that “must embrace older models of masculinity based on violence, intimidation, and control in order to re-masculinize themselves and their lives.” Walt returns to a model of violent masculinity that the frontier myth created and perpetuated, but this is complicated also by the show’s, and Citing Kimmel’s earlier works of cultural history, Faucette says “a man who is not a provider…doesn’t feel like much a man at all.” The myth of the individual violent man and the modern understanding of men as providers are present in Walt’s transformation as he, a modern American male, returns to a violent cultural image of frontier manhood in order to fulfill the role of the modern provider.
work of cultural history *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era* can give us a perspective into the current cultural moment that *Breaking Bad* (and other shows confronting the issue of masculinity) is reacting to. A follow-up to his 1996 text *Manhood in America* in which he tracked the creation and dissolution of the idea of the “self-made man,” *Angry White Men* argues that “the era of unquestioned and unchallenged male entitlement is over” and that the outcome of this cultural moment and the subjects of his book are “men who either don’t yet know it or sense the change in the wind and are determined to stem the tide.” While Walter White is not a character who actively and purposefully rejects the changing times, I do believe he is representative of and a reaction to the crisis of masculinity and changing roles of white men in America that Kimmel’s work presents. Walt psychologically suffers from the stresses and tensions Kimmel finds in white American men and is surrounded by some of the same diverse powers that are imagined to threaten the long-standing tradition of dominant white men.

Much of the frustration Kimmel discovered is rooted in the perceived dissolution of benefits that white men gain through entitlement and privilege. He says that “feeling..."
entitled by race or gender distorts one’s vision,” a distortion that Walt is guilty of as he repeatedly sacrifices the very family unit he set out to preserve. His masculinity as a father is threatened in his home while he believes that his prowess as a drug producer sets him apart from the violent non-white participants in the drug economy. He believes that his superior intellect somehow privileges and justifies his violent actions. In a move that summons Kimmel’s cultural crisis in “angry white men,” the series uses the Chilean-born Gus Fring, who is able to manage a business in a way that Walt is never able to replicate, as one of the greatest oppositions to Walt’s empire. In Gus’ empire, employees are paid and taken care of, a business model that Walt can never replicate and actively resists. The business created by a non-white immigrant in America is the more successful empire (albeit violent and illegal), an idea further explored in the next section.

The show repeatedly returns to masculinity as an area of insecurity and driving force in Walt’s decisions to remain in the meth business. Once he is successfully filtering his drug money into his family through his son’s website “Savewalterwhite.com,” he is not satisfied because he is still not known as the provider. His son is credited for the money that Walt made cooking meth, replacing Walt as the provider for the family, a displacement that angers Walt. He refuses to genuinely congratulate his son. It is not enough for Walt to provide; he must be known as the provider and he cannot stand the thought that his family perceives him as a dependent. This comes from insecurities about his masculinity, an insecurity that becomes amplified in moments he cannot be the provider for his family.

76 Kimmel Angry White Men xii.
77 “Mandala”
It is not only his son that displaces Walt as the provider throughout the series, but most of the people in his life. His ex-partner Elliot Schwartz offers to pay for his treatment with the abundant wealth he gained with the company he and Walt formed together with Walt’s research. Walt chose to leave the company before it was successful and become a teacher, a move that he secretly resents Elliot and Gretchen for. Grey Matter represents a huge missed opportunity for Walt, and is another moment when Walt’s role as a man and provider failed. He was, at Grey Matter, Gretchen’s lover and a highly skilled chemist. When he left the company, Gretchen and Elliot became lovers and wildly wealthy. Walt refuses to be emasculated by Elliot once again.

His wife Skylar, his students, and his brother-in-law Hank systematically emasculate Walt at the beginning of the series. After turning down the job at Grey Matter, and telling his wife he will not do chemotherapy (another attempt to control his life and mortality), his family holds an intervention, during which Walt openly discusses his unhappiness as a passive player in his own life in an attempt to gain some level of control as a man. During the intervention Walt is only allowed to speak when he is holding the speaking pillow, a microcosm of the rules and regulations that have driven him from this lifestyle and into behavior outside of these norms. Once he has the pillow, Walt speaks tellingly though cryptically about his desires: “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. Now, this last one cancer, all I have left is how I choose to approach this.”

He continues to say that “the worst part” is the fact that Skylar and Walt Jr. would only remember him as a sick and

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78 “Gray Matter”
dying man. In this moment, he seems to be concerned with the quality of his life, the control he has over his life, and the legacy that he will leave behind for his family.

Unfortunately, Walt’s failure to balance his idea of masculinity with the actual needs of his family drives him to compromise his family’s welfare in favor of the control over his life and empire. He wakes the next morning and tells Skylar that he will do the treatment, but as she hugs him and is relieved that he has ceded to her desire, the look on his face is conflicted. It is obvious that he has made a choice—to fulfill Skylar’s desires, but also his own. He denies the money from his ex-partners once again as the episode comes to a close and he walks up to Jesse’s house and says: “Wanna cook?”

He is going to try to survive cancer on his own terms and in a way that would situate him as the provider for the family, not a passive recipient of another man’s wealth.

Ironically, his effort to attain masculinity by cooking meth often pushes the power he pursues out of his grasp. When he returns from the “fugue state” discussed earlier, any sense of choice or control he once had as a father and husband is gone. Skylar tells him to stay home and not go back to work, and to do specifically “nothing” while she goes to her new banking job. Walt’s position as a provider for his family is displaced by Skylar’s job at the bank. Not only this, but her job sets the stage for her affair.

He continually grasps at various kinds of masculinity. While his construction on the house was indicative of metaphoric domestic erosion, the same scene serves to displace his masculinity as well. After completing days of potentially unnecessary renovations on the house, he is still restless. He is fixing the house, but his behavior around Skylar lacks any sense of the confidence and focus that he has doing chemistry.

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79 “Gray Matter”
80 “Over”
and exerting control as Heisenberg. The show ends this sequence of domestic unrest with a moment of assertion and overlap that reminds us that Walt is a character for whom the constraints of domesticity have become unbearable, and for whom the savage conditions of the borderlands have become a meth-like addiction. Back at the home improvement store he sees a cart full of gear that he immediately recognizes as ingredients and equipment for cooking meth. Shopping for the supplies is a young guy (doppelganger for Jesse Pinkman) whom Walt initially tries to help out, explaining that he does not have the correct supplies and that he should buy some supplies from all over town in order not to raise suspicion. While Walt is in the checkout line holding two gallons of primer, the camera zooms in on Walt’s face sequentially with the beeping of the checkout scanner. Walt puts down the two cans of primer and walks to the parking lot with a physical conviction we have only seen him display as Heisenberg. The way he moves across the parking lot with single-minded purpose, as well as the metaphoric leaving behind of the home improvement store marks a moment of decisive transition back into the aggressive masculine identity he has created in the drug world. This is an identity that can and will protect what he believes is rightfully his. His turf is being threatened, and he walks up to the two men, stares down the older man, leans in, and says “Stay out of my territory.”

He looks happy for the first time since he stopped cooking; he got his fix because he is now in a space in which he confidently has control. His use of the word territory invokes Walt’s identity as a sovereign power over a specific space, but his invocation of

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81 “Over”  
82 The sequential placement of this moment prior to a murder that brings Jesse and he back into the wilderness as explored earlier in the “rhetoric of necessity.” The show has this moment occur before the murder in order to make sure it is clear that Walt wants back in to the wilderness of meth cooking before it is actually necessary.
it in a home improvement store parking lot raises questions to where this masculine energy resides.

His masculinity is also challenged by his brother in law Hank at Walt’s house, a space where Walt desires the same level of respect that he gets in his second home, the RV, as a master meth cook. Their relationship puts Walt in the passive and less traditionally masculine role. During a party at his house, Walt sits at a table by the pool with Walt Jr. and his brother in law Hank drinking tequila shots. Hank, a DEA agent, regales Jr. with stories from the field, and Walt’s demeanor becomes angry and unresponsive. This is not the first time that Walt has felt his manhood threatened by Hank with regard to Jr., but this time Walt decides to take control of the situation, an action uncharacteristic for Walt. He gives Walt Jr. a series of tequila shots, and when Hank tries to slow him down, he becomes even more insistent saying “My son! My bottle! My house!”

Walt Jr. gets sick and vomits into the pool. As his son vomits and Skylar and Hank rush to his aid, Walt sits down with a smirk on his face and finishes his tequila shot. Walt later apologizes to Skylar in a voicemail that she listens to at Ted Beneke’s home, the space where she has been having an affair with her boss. Walt’s role as a father has been displaced by Hank, and as a husband, by Skyler’s boss Ted Beneke.

Another such moment that places Walt at odds with Hank with relation to his son Walter Jr. is during Walt’s birthday party. Walt Jr., as Brian Faucette points out, idolizes Hank. In this scene, Hank hands Walt his gun and makes fun of how awkward Walt looks while holding it. The gun “validates Hank’s masculinity and challenges Walt’s because a man like Walt is not comfortable wielding a gun…for men like Hank the gun is an

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83 “Over”
84 “Pilot”
extension of their masculinity and their authority.”\(^8^5\) Hank is a hero who embodies masculine authority where Walt is a passive, unhealthy, highly educated man. Walt’s life as a meth cook allows him to chase the type of masculinity his child idolizes.

Other characters notice that Walt’s vulnerability is his insecurity about his role as a man and a father. Gustav Fring, for example, is a man who has successfully built an empire and in many ways represents the type of masculinity-as-provider that Walt desires. Gus relies on Walt’s insecurity to persuade him to continue to cook in the meth super-lab despite the fact that Walt has enough money to support his family and his cancer is in remission. Gus takes him for a drive to show him the super-lab at the laundry, and it is at this point that Gus exploits Walt’s insecurities about being a provider for his family. During this sequence in the show, Walt’s masculinity is figuratively and literally displaced. As Walt is taken to the subterranean meth super-lab, Skylar goes to Ted’s house to continue her affair while Walt’s daughter is being taken care of by Marie.\(^8^6\)

While Skylar undermines the sexual foundations of Walt’s manhood, Gus challenges it through his speech:

\begin{quote}
Gus: I need 200 pounds per week to make this economically viable. You would choose your own hours, of course, come and go as you please, so long as the quota is met.
Walt: Sorry. The answer is still no. I have made a series of very bad decisions, and I cannot make another one.
Gus: Why did you make these decisions?
Walt: For the good of my family.
Gus: Then they weren’t bad decisions. What does a man do, Walter? A man provides for his family.
Walt: This cost me my family.
Gus: When you have children, you always have family. They will always be your priority, your responsibility. And a man... A man provides. And he does it
\end{quote}

\(^8^5\) Faucette, “Taking Control: Male Angst and Re-Emergence of Hegemonic Masculinity in Breaking Bad,” 76
\(^8^6\) “Más”
even when he's not appreciated, or respected, or even loved. He simply bears up, and he does it, because he's a man.87

Gus describes a kind of man that Walt cannot ever be, the kind of man to provide and not be appreciated or respected. Walt has a desire for a very specific type of manhood that is defined by recognition and appreciation. He wants the power he holds as the mythic Heisenberg, but he wants to experience that power in the context of his family. He wants to act outside the law and publically reap the benefits of those actions in a structure governed by the law. The result is that his desire to fulfill the myth of the gun-slinging cowboy conflicts with and supersedes his identity as a good father. As Faucette points out, “Walt is able to reclaim his masculine authority but at the expense of his marriage, his children, his character and perhaps his own humanity.”88 The temptation of the super-lab and the wealth it represents to Walt proves to be too much and he decides to continue to cook. His desire to provide an unimaginable amount of wealth to his family pushes him to try to fulfill the role of the provider while also continuing to work in the illegal drug world where his violence is regenerative.

Walt’s crisis of masculinity is complicated further because the type of manhood he desires is generated from Western archetypal protagonists. He simultaneously desires to leave a legacy as a father and as the mythological identity Heisenberg. Breaking Bad presents us with a Western protagonist defined by fatherhood, manhood, and masculinity, a mixture that many of the protagonists in the Western tradition did not have to fulfill. In films like High Noon, True Grit, The Searchers, and even the revisionist Western Unforgiven, the protagonists are allowed a violent masculine life that protects ideals of

87 “Más”
88 Faucette, “Taking Control: Male Angst and Re-Emergence of Hegemonic Masculinity in Breaking Bad,” 80
domesticity such as marriage (High Noon) and the family (Unforgiven, True Grit, The Searchers). Unforgiven, a film that actively and purposefully engages and resists the cultural myth production of the West, allows Munny to leave his children to exact his revenge through murder and return to settle successfully. He plays a masculine father/provider at home and a violent masculine gunslinger away from home. Breaking Bad uses this myth of masculinity to frustrate Walt as a character chasing his desire to fulfill a mythic masculine ideal in a frontier that will not allow it. Walt fails to fulfill his concept of manhood as a father but embraces the traditional, violent, male conquest in the illegal world of drug production.

Brian Baker’s Masculinity in Fiction and Film describes the role of the frontier and representations of masculinity within the “aging Western” genre. This can help place masculinity in Breaking Bad into the tradition that it is revising. In the “aging Western,” the protagonist exists as an outdated version of masculinity and the narratives serve to give them one final “showdown” before “stepping off the stage of history.”89 In this Western tradition, as the government, law, industrialization, and other tropes of settlement arrive in the “Wild West,” the violent forms of masculinity that existed must leave to make room for the new society. Baker closely examines Unforgiven and John Wayne’s last film The Shootist, among others, to exemplify cowboys who represented antiquated modes of masculinity.90 For Baker, these serve to “reread the development of the USA as a rites-of-passage narrative for white-male America [in which] the young

89 Baker, Masculinity in Fiction and Film, xi.
90 Baker, Masculinity in Fiction and Film, 134.
must reject the values of the old while nostalgically reinscribing the authority of the frontiersman as a validating father figure, gone but not forgotten.”

While aspects of the series place it into the aging Western tradition, its conflict and final resolution to issues of masculinity point toward a frontier narrative that rejects the ability for the violent male archetype to defend or participate in peaceful domestic fatherhood. So, in *Breaking Bad* we are presented with a troubled masculinity that fails both in its efforts to generate and maintain an empire as well as its efforts to protect the family. For Walt, violence is clearly a driving component of his progress, but he has not “outlived his time” and his violent nature directly threatens his family as he tries to concurrently exist within a modern society while also holding on to the violent nature necessary to survive the landscape of the drug trade. Walt cannot let go of his violent masculinity and does not escape after his final showdown because his violence has real and lasting effects on his family. While Walt is allowed a violent final showdown in which he mechanizes an automatic weapon to kill a room full of men, he is fatally injured in the shootout. He does not return to his family or restore any level of domestic ideal; rather, in his final moments, he enters the last iteration of the meth lab and, after nostalgically walking around the equipment, dies alone.

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91 Baker, *Masculinity in Fiction and Film* 136: Baker concludes that Westerns like *Unforgiven* allow for the violent masculine male to be re-incorporated into society rather than rejected from it: “This is the inverse of the Turner myth. Rather than the frontier and the West being the crucible of democracy, in *Unforgiven* they are the locus of violence. Rather than disavowing ‘progress’ in favour of nostalgia for the individual ethos of the frontiersman, the violence of the frontiersman is implicated in ‘progress.’” Munny exerts a violent masculine will over the injustice he sees (from outside of the law) only to go west and settle as a business owner. What Baker misses is that *Unforgiven* is still consistent with the myth because it still emphasizes the triumphal settlement.

92 “Felina
Walt fails to understand masculinity in a way that would allow for a happy marriage.\(^93\) One might say that Walter White is himself a product of the Western myth, even as the narrative situates him squarely within his family. Part of Walt’s failure to provide for his family in the way he so desires comes form his failure to reconcile his desire for masculine individualism with the conflicting desire to be admired as a provider for his family.

His masculine authority is defined by his genius in the lab as well as his exertion of force over others. In the first season episode entitled “Crazy Handful of Nothin’,” Walt asserts his authority through a violence he did not initially want to participate in, but one that he stepped into in the interest of building his empire. The episode opens with Walt telling Jesse that if they are to continue to cook, he wants nothing to do with the customers. As he says to Jesse “No matter what happens, no more bloodshed, no violence” we see Walt, now bald, walking away from a building amidst chaotic surroundings that signify an explosion. Walt carries a bloodstained bag full of money through the confused scene on the street. He is the lone figure walking away from the exploded building that captures everyone else’s attention.\(^94\) The scene around him indicates his return and use of a violent traditional model of masculinity to provide for his family. He carries the bag of money as the prize of his violence, representative of his goal as a father and provider. His initial reluctance, paired with the extreme use of violence, shows Walt’s desire to provide for his family using any means necessary, but also his efforts to fulfill a role of manhood.

\(^93\) His conflict fits into William Handley’s analysis of marriage in the American West and frontier narratives. The issue that modern critics (Handley among them) have found in historical and literary writing about the west is that it tends to favor the myth of the individual rather than the family and community networks that actually drive many of the narratives. Handley argues that frontier narratives have always incorporated marriage as an essential ingredient, and that the masculine individualism so common in the cultural imagination is more a product of the myth rather than the literary texts (or historical reality) of the frontier.

\(^94\) “Crazy Handful of Nothin’”
that the violent and hyper masculine drug dealers like Tuco Salamanca will respect. After the explosion in Tuco’s fortress like office, Tuco tells Walt, “you got balls,” signifying that the violence figuratively masculinizes Walt.

Walt’s effort to be the provider for his family takes the series all the way to the final episode of the series. The white supremacists, who Walt hired to commit extreme acts of violence in the interest of his empire, have taken most of his money, and his family has let him go. He has been isolated in the mountains but his desire to financially provide for his family remains and is one of his final actions. In a sequence that finalizes Walt’s failure as a provider and his failure to understand the damage he brought onto his house, Walt secretly calls his son in an effort to sneak him money. In the phone conversation Walt Jr. is disgusted that after everything Walt has done he still wants to give them money. He tells Walt that he does not want the money and that he wishes Walt were dead. Walt, bent on getting the wealth he amassed for his family to them, cannot directly give the money to his family so he uses his ex-partner to do it. He enters their house and threatens to kill Elliot and Gretchen if they do not get the money to his son. Even in his final moments, although the money will be given to Walt Jr., Walt will still not be recognized as the provider. It will publically come from the company he used to work for. His legacy as a father is a broken family with a son who wishes his father was dead.
Walt’s masculinity is certainly in crisis, and much of this crisis in evidenced in his figurative impotence and his obsessive pursuit of conquest, a conquest over others in the frontier, but also a conquest over his own nature. Where cowboys were confronted with vast landscapes and formidable geographies and the nature they were out to conquer consisted of wild animals and American Indians, for Walt, the nature is on a microscopic level. Walter is a master chemist, an identity perhaps at one extreme end of conquest over nature, and his profession dictates that the space in which he works be as far removed from the unpredictable natural world as possible. While the series does not consistently or dominantly rely on Leo Marx’s classic trope of the Machine in the Garden, the artistic and uncharacteristically cerebral episode “The Fly” translates this trope into the world of Breaking Bad by allowing nature to interrupt the industrialized space of the lab. While the industrial interruption of the pastoral motivated many narratives considering the impact of such rapid industrialization on the development of the land, the inverted use of the trope as nature interrupts the lab opens a space in the series for Walt to pause and reflect upon his choices and his existence in the meth industry, and also to exemplify Walt’s impotent and struggling conquest.

When Walt moves to Gus’ super-lab, he is at first a master of the space—a space full of expensive industrial equipment. The subterranean super-lab is a pristine space in
which all chemicals, components, and steps are precisely measured. It is a contained
industrialized space where Walt can control all aspects of production without variables.
As opposed to the pastoral image evolving due to industrialization, the lab is a space that
resists variable nature. In the episode “The Fly,” the lab, and Walt’s psyche, are
interrupted by nature in the form of a single fly. This episode comes as Walt loses control
over his lab and his relationship with Gus Fring. The empire that cost him his family is
crumbling. It is appropriate that given Walt’s chemical mastery over nature that it would
be a small component of nature, a fly, that mocks him.

Walt desires a clean separation between outside nature and inside production. He
views them as necessarily separate concepts to be contained and ordered. He explains the
situation to Jesse: “I have turned the ventilation up to keep the outside out. There’s uh,
been a contamination. Something got into the lab,”96 to which Jesse replies “So it’s not
dangerous?” and sheepishly Walt answers “Not to us, particularly” as he holds a wimpy
looking plastic contraption wrapped in tape that he poorly put together, another physical
symbol of Walt’s impotence. Obviously the physical interruption in the space is small,
but the psychological interruption it causes is enormous. In this scene it feels to Jesse,
and the audience, that nothing can happen in the lab without Walt knowing about it. Walt
simultaneously hunts the fly and thwarts Jesse’s attempts to continue the cook. The fly
moves around the lab with a freedom and unpredictability that Walt is impelled to
dominate. Walt will sacrifice the batch of meth and his own well being to ensure that the
freedom that this fly enjoys is stamped out.

96 “Fly”
This is indicative of Walt’s desire to have choice over his own nature and mortality. Walt wants to dictate the death of the fly just as he wants to dictate the terms of his own death. Walt goes so far as to define the fly as a contamination and claims that it “is by no means a misuse of the word...If we want to keep our lab and our cook clean, we need to take this very seriously...This fly is a major problem for us. It will destroy our batch. Failing that, we’re dead. There is no more room for error. Not with these people.”

Walt’s mental collapse, brought on by the interruption of the space by a minute form of nature, is a form of madness and an obsession with a mastery over his death and his concern about the choices he has made.

Jesse, afraid for his and Walt’s well being, drugs Walt so he will fall asleep. In his exhausted and drugged state, Walt confronts, in a rare, genuine moment of reflection and regret, the consequences of his choices and comes to accept, after much meditation, the unpredictability of life, accepting a figuratively emasculated position. His obsession with the fly, and its insistence on surviving despite all of Walt’s efforts to kill it, allow the interruption of the space of the lab to operate as a reflective moment in which Walt confronts his ruined legacy as a father and his inability to control his own mortality. In the monologue, he searches his past for when he missed the perfect moment to die. He believes that had he died at a specific and planned moment, it would have saved his family:

I missed it. There was some perfect moment and it passed me right by...I'm saying I've lived too long. I mean you want them to actually miss you, you know?...I know the moment. It was the night Jane died. Yeah, I was at home and we needed diapers and so I said I'd go, but it was just an excuse... The universe is random. It's not inevitable. It's simple chaos. It's subatomic particles in endless aimless collision. That's what science teaches us. That was the moment. That

97 “Fly”
night. I should never have left home…I was at home watching TV…and Skyler and Holly were in another room. I could hear them on the baby monitor. She was singing a lullaby. If I had just lived right up to that moment and not one second more, that would have been perfect.98

Walt generally wants order and resists the chaos of nature. He wants to control his own nature but the moment he would have liked to die has past – he must go, regretfully, forward. Jesse kills the fly as Walt falls asleep. The next day Walt goes home and is laying in bed. A fly buzzes above him as he sleeps and it wakes him. Nature has interrupted Walt’s life and its resistance to his control troubles his state of mind. For *Breaking Bad*, nature interrupts the industrialized space and overcomes Walt with the reality of his random, uncontrollable mortality—nature challenges his masculine desire for conquest.

*Myth of Heisenberg and the End of an Empire*

Criticism about frontier narratives tries to break the various myths of the west in order to understand a more culturally competent frontier.99 The myths of the west are ideas that exist in the imagination but persist, in certain ways, as truth. *Breaking Bad*

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98 “Fly”

99 See generally Handley, Rollins and O’Conner, Rebecca Johnson, Slotkin, Limerick, Sultze. Critics agree that because fictional narratives about the west and its pioneering characters preceded the historical documents, history was indelibly influenced by fiction. Many historians, like William Handley, argue for a synthesis of history and literature when talking about the American West. He believes that given the nature of how frontier mythology and frontier history have developed, it is counterproductive to separate the two. Because of this, fictional representations of the West have always been complicated by a need to place the narratives into historical moments or with historic backdrops like the Civil War. By doing so, the frontier has been a space for narratives that might offer criticism about contemporary cultural concepts by filtering the fiction through the historic moment. Similarly, Peter Rollins and John O’Conner, in their text *Hollywood’s West: The American Frontier in Film, television, and History* establish that Westerns have, and remain to, act as “a touchstone to the understanding the nation’s concerns.” Because of this, they maintain that “the study of the evolution of the Western in not a detached, academic endeavor; it is a chance to look at the potentials of our nation as they have been explored by some of our best literary and visual artists.” In Rebecca Johnson’s essay “Living Deadwood: Imagination, Affect, and the Persistence of the Past,” her analysis of Deadwood as a “Shakespeare meets The Sopranos” style Western, summarizes a similar sentiment in her research: “[a western] tells us less about that past than about the cultural attitudes of the present.”
participates in this myth creation by generating Walt’s alter-ego “Heisenberg” and the mythic level it gains in the show. This myth, however, is built amidst the construction of Walt’s empire. This series was created during a period of ongoing drug production and transport from Mexico to the United States and the subsequent drug wars—the backdrop of the series. In 2013, it was reported that a single Mexican cartel controlled 80% of the meth business in the United States.\textsuperscript{100} \textit{Breaking Bad} represents a fear of entrepreneurial invasion that is taking place both in the legal and illegal economies. It comes in a moment of displaced power and the crumbling myth of the ethnocentric American Dream and American empire.

In a recent (May 2014) editorial for the \textit{New York Times}, Anand Giridharadas explored the changing power dynamic between immigrants and native-born Americans. He begins his article by saying “if you want to die a successful American, especially in the heartland, it helps to be born abroad.”\textsuperscript{101} He goes on to explain what he terms the “immigrant advantage” that seems to pervade all aspects of life in America from marriage, to professional success, to education. He describes an immigrant victim of a racially charged post-9/11 attack who forgave his attacker because “the native Texan hadn’t had the same shot at the American dream as the ‘foreigner’ he’d tried to kill.”\textsuperscript{102} Giridharadas explains that naturalized citizens have an advantage because they have a mixture of rugged individualism and the ability to use a community for support, the second of which he claims most native born Americans lack. While on one end \textit{Breaking}

\textsuperscript{100} Santiago Wills \textit{ABC News} “This Mexican Cartel Controls 80 Percent of the U.S. Meth Trade, Study Finds.” This is also discussed in Jim Salter’s article on the Huffington Post “Mexico Drug Cartels Flood Cheap Meth Into U.S.” and the St. Louis \textit{Associated Press} article by Mark Stevenson and Christopher Sherman “Mexico Cartels fill demand for meth in USA.”


\textsuperscript{102} Giridharadas, “The Immigrant Advantage.”
Bad represents a cultural crisis of masculinity, on the other it explores the erosion of the myth of the American Dream and entrepreneur. As a result, Breaking Bad can be viewed as a response to the changing identity of the American empire.

The stress of the shifting structure of America as described by Giridharadas is present in many ways in the series, not the least of which is Walt’s various employers. The principle at his school is a Hispanic-American woman, and at his second job at the car wash, where he is constantly taken advantage of and has no authority, he works as the cashier under a man named Bogdan Wolynetz (Marius Stan), a Romanian-American. Later in the series Skylar and Walt decide that they want the car wash for themselves as a vehicle for laundering the incredible amount of wealth that Walt accrues cooking meth. After failing to ascertain the car wash legally through negotiation with Bogdan, Skylar and Walt resort to deceit in order to steal the business from Bogdan. Not only does an immigrant own and run a successful and legal business, a white native-born family deceives him and runs him out. The series presents a setting in which the fears that Kimmel and Giridharadas present come to life. With the exception of Hank, most positions of authority and power are held by non-white, often immigrant characters.

Perhaps the most prevalent of such characters is Gus Fring, a Chilean-born citizen who employs Walt as a meth cook for several seasons of the show. Again, Walt is an employee in a successful (illegal) business started and run by an immigrant, a business he acquires by killing Gus with a suicide bomb strapped to an ex-cartel member. He kills his immigrant boss by playing him against another immigrant. Interestingly, the meth empire goes into complete decline with Walt at the helm, and eventually leads to Walt’s inclusion of a white-supremacist group into the business. This results in Jesse’s eventual
slavery. Under Walt, the strength of Gus’ empire dissolves into a corrupted murderous business commanded by white-supremacists who enslave Jesse to produce meth. Far from the American Dream, Walt remains as either subservient in the empire, or as the driving force behind its destruction.

It is important to point out that much of Walt’s violence is toward men of color. Kimmel’s cultural history unearths the blame that white men are placing on women and men of color as the culturally dominant privilege of being a white man dissolves. Immigrant men and men of color dominate the borderland drug world that Walt steps into. They have cross-border connections and ties that somehow facilitate the construction of illegal empires that Walt can never replicate. Not until the final season is Walt forced into a violent battle against other white men who are “othered” by their status as white supremacists, and who also represent the ideology and anger that Kimmel found in many of the men he met writing his book.

Walt chases the crumbling myth of the self-made man in an attempt to provide for his family while also fulfilling an ideal of masculinity born, and persistent, in American frontier narratives. As Kimmel claims, “American white men bought the promise of self-made masculinity, but its foundation has all but eroded.”103 The show confronts this crisis in Walt’s search for the American Dream outside of America’s legal boundaries and Walt’s inability to accept the richness of his family life as having a value enough to satisfy him. He chases the dissolving American Dream of the self-made man in the illegal drug economy as a result of his failure to fulfill the multiple kinds of masculinity he believes are necessary. He looks outside of the law because he is representative of the

103 Kimmel, Angry White Men, 15.
frustrated men who currently believe that the system is directly oppressing them. These men believe that it is necessary to take the law into their own hands. Ultimately, Kimmel establishes a men-as-victims philosophy in which men blame others for the confused tension between the traditional violent and empowered view of masculinity, and the “liberated” view of masculinity that would allow men to be fathers with more productive relationships with their children. Just like the frustrated men Kimmel describes in his book, Walt wants both.

In the wake of Gus’ death, Walt is confronted with the freedom to pursue the meth empire and the harsh realities of the cost of the meth business without Gus’ infrastructure. The dwindling supply of methylamine (a primary ingredient in Walt’s specialized cook) and ongoing costs to keep Gus’ men (now imprisoned) quiet, continually frustrate Walt and he becomes increasingly sovereign in how the business is run. While Gus relied on fear and violence to maintain his empire, the violence Walt employs is of an entirely different ilk. Kimmel ‘s cultural history works through many different types of angry white men but the overall claim is that white men point their anger toward women or non-white men, but the real enemy “is an ideology of masculinity that we inherited from our fathers, and their fathers before them, an ideology that promises unparalleled acquisition coupled with a tragically impoverished emotional intelligence.” Walt killed the head of the empire and believed that he would be able to simply take Gus’ place on top. He confronts this myth head on and the writers of the

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104 This comes in his third chapter entitled “White Men as Victim’s: The Men’s Rights Movement in which he uses Den Hollander as an exemplar—an educated, wealthy white male who feels that it is necessary to take a stand to keep men categorically out of the servitude into which he feels “feminazi’s” are putting men. While Hollander is specifically angry at women, his philosophy that men must act outside of normal structures in order to resist this ideology, and the sociological victimization of men is apt.

105 Kimmel, Angry White Men, 108-109

106 Kimmel, Angry White Men, 9
show summon classic Western ideology as Mike says “Listen Walter, just because you shot Jesse James, does not make you Jesse James.” This moment frustrates Walt because he believed that by displacing Gus he would have access to “unparalleled acquisition,” but he is not able to fulfill the same sovereign role as Gus.

Walt feels in this moment much like Kimmel defines as he points to the multiple roles that define masculinity and the dissolving privilege afforded to white men: “[white men] are feeling emasculated—humiliated. The promise of economic freedom, of boundless opportunity, of unlimited upward mobility, was what they believed was the terra firma of American masculinity, the ground on which American men have stood for generations. Today, it feels like a carpet being snatched from under their feet.”

Desperate to build his own empire and relieve himself of Gus’ shadow, Walt pays a group of neo-Nazi ex-cons to coordinate the murder of ten imprisoned men linked to Gus’ empire who are costing Walt too much money. Walt blames his financial woes on someone other than himself. In this highly organized and violent scene, Walt, the man behind the murders, sits safely and distant from the violence he brings upon the men.

His is an empire built on, and led by, the mythic violence of his alter ego Heisenberg. Despite the inevitable failure of Walt’s empire, his attempt to create and build it makes up the majority of the series. In the fifth season episode entitled “Buyout,” Walt says to Jesse, “You asked me if I was in the meth business or the money business. Neither. I'm in the empire business.” He builds his empire alongside the development of his mythical alter ego Heisenberg. From early in the series the idea of Heisenberg is larger than life, but the show calls attention to the myth. During a briefing about the blue

107 “Hazard Pay”  
108 Kimmel, Angry White Men, 13  
109 “Buyout”
meth that Hank is giving at the DEA he says “we have a new kingpin,” immediately after which we see Walt brushing his teeth, a domestic behavior unrelenting in its contrast to the idea of a drug kingpin.110

One of the most obvious moments of myth production in the series comes after Tuco’s death and a sketched image of Heisenberg, with the hat, is seen in Mexico. The episode “Negro y Azul” opens with a music video of a *narco-corrido*, a genre of Mexican ballad that focuses on drug smugglers, performed by the band Los Cuates de Sinaloa singing a song about Heisenberg and his reputation. The song places the myth of Heisenberg and the threat he represents in direct contrast to the violent Mexican drug cartels. Even as the myth spreads across the border it competes with more violent, powerful, and fearful enterprises. The frontier in *Breaking Bad* is not an unsettled wilderness in which Walt can freely exert his power, it is one that is populated by drug cartels, drug users, and other forces that he has to contend with. The lyrics of the song frame New Mexico in terms of a dominant Mexican presence, displacing the dominant force of Heisenberg and therefore, the dominant force of white men. One verse reads:

    Now New Mexico's name is well suited.
    Now it looks just like Mexico
    'Cause of all the drugs it's hiding,
    Except there's a gringo boss
    And as "Heisenberg" they know him.111

New Mexico is represented here not in terms of white men pioneering conquest, but in terms of a subversive conquest of a drug culture brought up from Mexico. This is not a space occupied and dominated by white men, but rather a space subversively identified

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110 “Cancer Man”
111 “Negro y Azul”
and controlled by the Mexican drug cartels. The mythical power of the cartels
overpowers the myth of Heisenberg in the song:

Heisenberg's fame
Has reached down to Michoacán.
From way over there they want to come
Only to taste that crystal.
That blue stuff has gone international…
From the fury of the cartel
No one has ever escaped.
This homie's already dead
He just doesn't know it yet.

While Walt is high on power as Heisenberg, unbeknownst to him the Mexican drug cartel
is sending men to kill him. These two men exemplify a kind of relentless violence and
infiltration that knows no boundaries. In the show, they rarely speak and they act with
complete focus and disregard for their own safety. They do not fear death and look to
revenge the death of their cousin Tuco Salamanca by killing Heisenberg. If confronted by
these two men Walt would most certainly not have survived. Luckily for him, they are
redirected at the command of Gus Fring to go after Walt’s brother in law Hank instead.
Gus is the head of a huge meth empire and not only employs Walt but is also the only
force that can save him from relentless violence of the cartels. Walt, far from the head of
an empire, cannot protect himself from the violence his actions bring to him.

The relationship of myth to the construction of empire in the series is something
that Gilligan and the show’s creators purposely invoke by alluding to Percy Shelley’s
Romantic poem “Ozymandias,” a name used for an episode of the series, as well as the
driving force behind a teaser for the final season of the show.112 The teaser exemplifies
the series’ conversation that intertwines myth, empire, and the American West. It opens

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112 “Ozymandias - As Read by Bryan Cranston: Breaking Bad,” YouTube video, 1:10, posted by “AMC,”

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with a time-lapsed sunset over the New Mexican desert. A barbed wire fence on the left side of the frame interrupts the wide horizon. The montage then cuts to another time-lapse of sun rising and electrical lines cut sharply into the sky over the desert; a desert landscape that is pierced by development and industrialization. Following this is a series of familiar images showcasing desert plateaus and landscapes, locations that while not visibly interrupted by wires or fences, have a history of violence created in the series. The montage then cuts to a shot of the RV framed as if it is a plateau cutting across the sky. Shots of the landscape are crosscut with scenes of Albuquerque and familiar sites from the series. For the viewers, these locations have unique histories and the visual montage juxtaposes the settled industrialized modern cityscape with the vast desert landscape.

These spaces make up the show’s frontier for empire building and violence. Over the montage Bryan Cranston reads Percy Shelley’s sonnet “Ozymandias:”

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: ’Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear --
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.’

The teaser ends with a low tracking shot over the sand that reveals the pork pie hat synonymous with Walt’s transformation and identity as the mythological meth producer with the pseudonym Heisenberg. His hat lay solitary in the desert. Shelley’s poem tells two conflicting stories: that of an emperor of great power and the “boundless and bare”
wreckage that remain. The desert scene puts the remains of the empire in a space that contrasts the past glory of Ozymandias whose empire was built, at least in part, on self glorification. A giant statue of himself proclaiming his name sets up the wonderful dual meaning “Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair.” Despair initially at the fearful thought of a king or empire with such power, and now, despair at the appearance of the remains that serve to remind any traveler that even the greatest of empires will fall. As Cranston reads the final words, we see his hat in the sand, and just as the poem claims, “The lone and level sands stretch far away.” Walter White, like Ozymandias, builds a fearful empire, but unlike Ozymandias’ legacy that is relegated to a second hand story from one traveler to another, Walt’s empire, and myth, will not only survive in wreckage and remains in the desert, but also in the lasting violence he exerts on his family.

In the fifth season, the episode “Ozymandias” explores the fading empire by juxtaposing the dream the empire was initially built upon and the reality of the violent empire on his family.\(^\text{113}\) The episode opens with a flashback of Walt and Jesse cooking in the R.V; Walt has hair, Jesse looks young, and the mood reminds the audience of the humble and almost fun relationship they had at the start of the series. Walt is trying to teach Jesse about chemistry, which reminds us of Walt’s identity as a teacher and of their seemingly innocent beginnings. Walt steps outside in his underwear and steps away from the RV to call Skylar. This flashback serves to show the extent of Walt’s dissolution, and the extent of the horrible empire he has created. Before he calls Skylar he practices his lie, and while he speaks to her over the phone, far off behind him Jesse jumps off of rocks and plays with sticks by the RV. There is playful innocence to Jesse and despite Walt’s

\(^{113}\) “Ozymandias”
deceit to his wife, here we see the Walter White who began so innocently hoping to provide money for his family. This is the character who decided to go into business for himself (albeit illegally) in order to pay for his cancer treatment and provide for his family after his death. Walt visually fades from the frame, followed by Jesse and the RV. The sound of automatic gunfire echoes through the desert as the flashback closes and the current scene fades in. The White supremacist group ceases fire as we see Hank, wounded, and his partner Steve Gomez, dead in the sand. The violence Walt’s empire brought to his family is exposed.

Walt’s empire and compassion fall apart in many ways in this sequence as we see the empire Walt built, and the extraordinary wealth he accrued dissipate. The moment invites a recollection of Shelley’s poem. This desert space holds with it the complete narrative of Walter White. By the end of the scene, having just been reminded of the innocence and playfulness Walt and Jesse had at the start of the series, all that remains is despair. Hank is fatally shot and Walt falls into the sand weeping. As the white supremacists find the $80 million in cash buried in the desert, Walt does not move, but lies in the sand staring at Hank’s corpse. The words “nothing beside remains” take a particularly poignant meaning as Hank and Gomez are dragged and buried in the hole where Walt hid his money.

This exact desert space is where Jesse and Walt first cooked, committed their first murder, where Walt committed the first major lie to his wife, buried the money his empire gained him, and now, where Walt watches his brother in law be buried and gives Jesse up for torture and execution. Despite all of this, once the hole is filled, there are only small and seemingly insignificant pieces of evidence that any of this occurred. If a
traveler were to find this space they might find bullet shells in the sand and bullets in the rocks, but with a quick glance, nothing remains here of the horror that has taken place.

The desert space in *Breaking Bad* represents the space where empire both begins and ends.
CONCLUSION

In his comprehensive genre based text entitled *The Western*, David Lusted explains that the production of Westerns is less frequent now than in any other point in the twentieth century.\(^{114}\) He explains that the skillset in actors, stuntmen, and cinematographers dwindled, and the direct connection to the frontier dwindled as well. John Ford claimed to have direct connections and inspirations for moments in his films giving them a sense of authenticity, but as Lusted points out, “No one today can boast of such personal relationships, however fanciful.”\(^{115}\) He goes on to discuss the many cultural and political factors that perhaps have influenced the decline in the frequency of narratives in the Western genre, but importantly he argues that “the purpose of studying the Western lies in coming to understand the complex popular memory of this resonant film history. Each new Western film produced adds to the layers of meanings around the Western from years of previous association. Each adds to a body of work of immense cultural substance and historical longevity.”\(^{116}\)

*Breaking Bad* takes part in this tradition by revising the mythic Western narrative. It has a particular resonance right now because it operates as a kind of meta-Western in which to explore the influence of the Western on the American imagination at a moment of imperial decline. Walt is a protagonist who actively and unsuccessfully chases the mythological masculine and heroic identity of the Western hero. By the final episode, Walt moves through Albuquerque as a ghost, impossibly avoiding law enforcement and

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\(^{115}\) Lusted, *The Western*, 5

\(^{116}\) Lusted, *The Western*, 10
passing in and out of spaces as he wills, but with extremely limited power. The allegoric entrepreneurial genius who created the mythic and imperially dominant identity Heisenberg, says goodbye to his family and dies alone in a meth lab.

The frontier in *Breaking Bad* is a space that allows for behavior that transgresses societal ethics but denies the regenerative myth of this transgression. The modern frontier in *Breaking Bad* is a space where the crumbling myth of the American individual and the American empire is exposed. The relationship of empire to the state in the series is one of ethically and legally transgressive violence—a violence that is vilified rather than justified in the name of conquest. *Breaking Bad* participates in a movement in the Western genre that deals with the lasting ill effects of violence and conquest as well as the cultural crisis of masculinity. Walt’s empire, and the cultural crisis of the American empire it is a response to, is troubled by violence and motivated by money in an era of shifting cultural norms and identities in which war and violence are not specifically located, but rather infiltrate every area of domesticity through terrorism, drug use, and the borderland drug wars. Once believed to be the beginning of a long and prosperous American empire, the frontier, through *Breaking Bad*, is a theoretical and physical space where we see the myth of that empire collapse, and with it the mythological ideologies on which it was founded.
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