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## Introduction: From The Weight of Gold to the Weight of History In Hbo's *Deadwood*

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# INTRODUCTION

## FROM THE WEIGHT OF GOLD TO THE WEIGHT OF HISTORY IN HBO'S DEADWOOD

"POWER COMES TO ANY MAN WHO  
HAS THE COLOR." — GEORGE HEARST,  
DEADWOOD, SEASON 3, EPISODE 31

In the opening scene of the first episode of HBO's critically acclaimed historical drama *Deadwood*, an ordinary gold miner, Ellsworth (Jim Beaver), walks into the Gem Saloon, owned by Al Swearengen (Ian McShane), and proclaims: "I may 'a fucked my life up flatter than hammered shit, but I stand before you today, beholden to no human cocksuckers. And workin' a payin' fuckin' gold claim."<sup>1</sup> Ellsworth has established a gold claim in the Black Hills of the future South Dakota, and his proclamation of autonomy flows from the power and freedom gold delivers, even in the lawless town of Deadwood. At this point in

the series, Ellsworth is a simple miner, a representative of the men who swarmed the hills in the 1870s to reap the rewards of untapped gold reserves. In the poetics of Western discourse, he seeks the company of whores in the evening and the solitude of the hills when he awakes. In *Deadwood*, he is just another denizen trying to escape a previous life and carve out an existence free from the confines of civilization.

As the narrative progresses over three TV seasons, Ellsworth's transformation comes to represent the evolving nature of the town itself, as he shifts from being an outsider on the fringes to being at the center of local politics. His marriage of convenience (her convenience, not his) to the widow Alma Garret (Molly Parker) thrusts him out of his comfortable self-reliance and reluctantly into the convolutions of political and economic jockeying that threaten the town's survival. His only resistance is to the monomaniacal George Hearst (Gerald McRaney), and it is at the hands of Hearst's henchman that Ellsworth finally meets an unjustified and violent end.

Reading the narrative arc of *Deadwood*—the town and the series—through the development of Ellsworth's character shows the underlying effect of the settlement of the West on the individual settler and the individual's repeated powerlessness against the momentum of history. Like Ellsworth, the town of

*Editor's Note: In July 2006 I asked David Holmberg to solicit essays which took a critical perspective on the television series Deadwood. Once the articles were selected, three of which were presented at the 60th Annual Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association Convention, they underwent peer review before being accepted for publication.*



FIG. 1. *Deadwood Main Street*. Courtesy of Adams Museum, Deadwood, SD. [98-190]

Deadwood moves from hinterland settlement to economic gold mine, literally, and the source of considerable political anxiety for the government authorities. We see in *Deadwood*, through Ellsworth, a formal tragedy of the settlement of the American West, a thought that series creator David Milch echoes: "Deadwood, like other gold rush towns, was a kind of reenactment of the founding of our country."<sup>2</sup> The story of Deadwood is the story of the settlement of our nation, and as such it demands critical exploration. That the series portrays this narrative over the course of just three seasons, let alone within the character arc of one seemingly minor character, shows the latent potential of television, which has only just begun to manifest itself in recent years.

At some level, all Westerns are concerned with matters of the frontier, the settlement of the wild borders and the conflicts arising from that process. Yet one of the oft-heard observations about *Deadwood*, both as praise and criticism, is that it defies traditional genre characteristics of the classic Western. This may be true to an extent—for example, only one live Native American is ever seen, although Al Swearengen does consult a severed chief's head throughout most of the series—but it also misses the underlying point of the series: more than being a revisionist Western, *Deadwood* is about a group of people struggling for survival, and it just happens to be set on the western frontier. That is not to diminish the importance of the show to the Western genre or to

trivialize its significance in rethinking western settlement; on the contrary, the series deemphasizes these issues in favor of the humanity of colonization, providing us valuable avenues through which to return and reexamine classic Western concerns.

The essays collected in this issue of *Great Plains Quarterly* begin the process of exploring the importance of *Deadwood* to the West and to the Western genre. Each essay approaches the topic from a different perspective, including language, morality, gender, and economics, but all seek the same goal—that is, to locate the series within the context of classic Western trends and ideologies while simultaneously examining how the show breaks with those ideals. Brad Benz of Fort Lewis College examines the oft-cited uniqueness of the series—the language—in “*Deadwood* and the English Language.” His essay seeks a dual purpose: to situate the language historically in the Western genre and to examine the unique particulars of a language both Victorian and vulgar in nature. In “No Law: *Deadwood* and the State,” Mark L. Berrettini of Portland State University discusses the tensions between the gold miners’ camp and the state in relation to the pressures of law and order. Using an Althusserian model, Berrettini proposes that the camp dwellers reject their integration into the state in order to retain their individuality and to prevent their transformation into state subjects. In “Whores and Other Feminists’: *Deadwood*’s Unlikely Feminisms,” Annie Petersen of the University

of Texas explores *Deadwood*’s complex relationship with women and feminism. By tracing the trajectories of several of the key female figure in *Deadwood*, Petersen maneuvers *Deadwood*’s feminisms into the contemporary, postfeminist discussion, discovering in the series’ formulation of sexual politics a criticism of our modern gendered failures. The last essay, “‘Gold Is Every Man’s Opportunity’: Castration Anxiety and the Economic Venture in *Deadwood*,” Kyle Wiggins of Brandeis University and David Holmberg of the University of Washington explore the economics of western settlement. Through the image of castration, *Deadwood* presents a sustained argument regarding the problematic and traumatic realities of the annexation of the frontier space, articulating the specifically emasculating qualities of the nation. *Deadwood* is one of the intellectually richest television programs in years—perhaps ever—and I hope that academic interest and criticism of the series will only continue to grow in the coming years.

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#### NOTES

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

2. David Milch, *Deadwood: Stories of the Black Hills* (New York: Melcher Media, 2006), 41.