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Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America, and: Latent Destinies:
Cultural Paranoia and Contemporary U.S. Narrative (review)

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(Review)

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***Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America.* By Deborah Nelson. New York: Columbia Univ. Press. 2002. xxii, 209 pp. Cloth, \$47.50; paper, \$17.50.**

***Latent Destinies: Cultural Paranoia and Contemporary U.S. Narrative.* By Patrick O'Donnell. Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press. 2000. xi, 193 pp. Cloth, \$49.95; paper, \$17.95.**

These two radically different books address pressing postmodern questions of identity, history, and the kind of subjectivity that depends on narrative discourse. Patrick O'Donnell's *Latent Destiny* doesn't mention privacy, the term and concept that frames Deborah Nelson's study. And while Nelson, in *Pursuing Privacy*, does mention paranoia, O'Donnell's primary concern, she invokes it to argue that "[n]o era is more in need of reparative rather than paranoid reading than the cold war" (xix). For Nelson, postwar nostalgia for an assumed distinction between public and private, as well as a fear of losing such distinctions, limits the critical and social possibilities of her subject—confessional poetry and doctrines of constitutional privacy that emerge simultaneously at the end of the 1950s. O'Donnell, on the other hand, argues in his readings of contemporary film and fiction that the paranoia he views as characteristic of the Cold War era persists in contemporary culture. Ultimately, Nelson and O'Donnell each suggest that white, heterosexual men are still anxious—even paranoid—about losing their stable, powerful, and seemingly fixed subjectivities.

"Privacy, it seems, is not simply dead. It is dying over and over again" (xi), Nelson claims, noting that since the Cold War, the changing boundaries between public and private spheres have become an obsession in U.S. politics, aesthetics, and intellectual life. The death of privacy signals the end of elite, patriarchal notions of property, bodily integrity, and family, promising to generate new kinds of privacies that do not deprive people who are not heterosexual and male of their personal autonomy. More than a domestic right, privacy came to be understood as a political right when the sanctity of the home became a crucial locus in the fight against what was perceived as potentially totalitarian, intrusive police tactics. In the Cold War era, privacy allowed a free citizen to refrain from speaking and to defend himself against coercion as well as the political and metaphorical violation of his political personhood. The postwar liberal struggle against forced disclosure led to the "right to silence," which, in Nelson's analysis, makes the contemporaneous transition from forced disclosure to voluntary confession the critical, and perhaps definitive, tension in postwar debates about privacy. In close readings of confessional poetry by Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, Paul Monette, and others in the context of their engagements with specific legal debates about privacy (notably *Roe v. Wade* and *Bowers v. Hardwick*), Nelson explores how these poets' willingness to confess—and therefore publicly expose—details of their private bodily, sexual, and gendered identi-

ties radically alters the rhetorical and practical terms of the privacy debate. In her discussion of *Roe v. Wade*, for example, Nelson shows the ways in which “[w]omen, especially mothers in cold war culture, often functioned as metaphors of a highly unstable border between public and private, a possibly treacherous incapacity to defend the boundaries of home and nation” (114). By law, a pregnant woman had to confess her personal decision to terminate her pregnancy and only if her doctor deemed her reasoning legitimate could she be granted an abortion. Women’s fates thus hinged upon their ability to narrate their personal stories so that “their ability to be private lay not in their bodies, which could not be withdrawn from the scrutiny of the doctor, but in their language” (116). Nelson cogently details the emergence of women’s privacy as an act of confession—the literal and rhetorical repositioning of the female body within the public sphere—and examines confessional poets such as Plath and Sexton, whose personal self-disclosures anticipate the Supreme Court’s emerging interpretation of privacy as no longer available in silence. Now a linguistic concern, privacy is not individual but social.

According to Nelson, male contemporaries of Plath and Sexton were able to protect their physical integrity, their bodily privacy, by creating the illusion of its loss. She argues that “the transgression of male privacy is, in fact, unrepresentable” (119), except if that man is gay and if he believes that his right to sexual freedom has anything to do with his right to privacy. For a gay male poet like Monette, his rights as a citizen depend on his ability to reveal publicly, through discourse, his private life. Simultaneously a privileged citizen and a sexual outlaw, the white, gay, middle-class poet for the first time experiences his “right-less-ness” in the *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision, “discover[ing] that his privacy was to be purchased not through silence, and not simply through publicity, but through a *studied* self-disclosure” (147). In *Pursuing Privacy*, privacy as an indicator of citizenship gets turned inside out; the right to privacy depends on publicity. Discourse makes this paradox most vivid and, for Nelson, proves that “[w]hen you have no right to privacy, everything becomes a confession” (154).

The paranoia that is the focus of O’Donnell’s *Latent Destinies* “is something that occurs between men” (77). If men in the postmodern moment fear the collapse of boundaries that would delineate distinctions between “‘inside’ and ‘outside’ aligned with ‘female’ and ‘male,’ or a projection of libidinality that results in a reinscription of the gendered logic of reproduction,” O’Donnell writes, then their cultural paranoia can be read as “the desire to name and control the real” (81). O’Donnell’s discussion of the representation of John Kennedy’s assassination in history, film, and literature, for example, explores how paranoid renarrations of Kennedy’s death function like a narrative “cure” for the postmodern, historical trauma that positions individuals outside historical narrative, displaced in the gap between knowledge and truth. Disclosure and often (to borrow a phrase from Nelson) “*studied* self-disclosure” of “all the secrets surrounding assassination” (63) can provide the paranoid, displaced

individual the means of making narrative sense of “true” history and, most important, render such individuals, like Lee Harvey Oswald, central to historical narratives of history and nation. Gender, sexuality, and, presumably, race play a crucial role in the narratological effects of paranoia because “others” (such as the female paranoid, Oedipa, in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*) wait outside history and historical discourse, in liminality. A symptom of the conditions of postmodernity, the female paranoid remains “suspended in the increasing gap between all the ‘betweens’ of signifier and signified, semiotic and symbolic, maternal materiality and paternal ideality” (89). O’Donnell’s elucidation and critique of the persistence of paranoid narratives in the race for self-knowledge in history offers readers the opportunity “to recognize the nonalignments of material identity . . . that comprise historical being as such” so that we might imagine “a future for identity within the reach of history, to which we are most bound over as subjects when we most misrecognize it” (159).

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***Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness.* By Alan D. Hodder. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press. 2001. xix, 346 pp. \$35.00.**

***Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination.* By Ross Labrie. Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press. 2001. ix, 263 pp. \$34.95.**

Emphasizing the providential and the ecstatic, and sensitive to ontological unity and wholeness as hallmarks rather than diversions of human purpose, Alan Hodder and Ross Labrie move against the grain of contemporary literary scholarship qua cultural studies. As a result, these two books are refreshingly counterinsurgent.

Of the two, Hodder is more self-conscious about the antinomian tendencies in his critical study of Thoreau’s spiritual life. Such a tight and fascinating focus on the role of religious experience in Thoreau’s life and writing, after all, runs against two decades of Thoreau studies more concerned with textual, political, ideological, and theoretical agendas. In Labrie’s case, the current of Thomas Merton studies flows, for the most part, in the opposite direction—toward Merton’s iconic status as mystic and saint, interrupted occasionally by critical eddies that remind us that he was an important writer and social critic who fully inhabited twentieth-century life from his hermitage tucked deeply into the Kentucky woods.

Labrie’s central contention is that Merton’s mountainous and variegated oeuvre—spanning everything from his spiritual narratives and religious scholarship to his experimental poetry and social commentary—springs from a compelling drive for unity and inclusiveness that animated Merton as a writer.