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Deadwood , HBO (review)

Victoria Addis

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MEDIA REVIEWS

Deadwood, HBO, (2004–6)

HBO's *Deadwood* presents a raw and violent image of the Old Midwest. The acclaimed television series draws on historical details, including persons and events, to advance its vision of the turbulent years before the annexation of South Dakota. In focusing on the frontier history of the Midwest, *Deadwood* reminds viewers accustomed to associating the frontier with the West alone—rather than the larger area of the “Great West” which included midwestern, northeastern, and Upland South regions—that the Midwest in fact connects with that broader narrative of American “progress,” as well as the attendant economic fervor and relative lawlessness that arose in those early days of community building.

A mining town founded during the Black Hills gold rush, Deadwood was constructed on land that had been legally ceded to the Lakota-Sioux in the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie. An illegal town in a dangerous location, Deadwood attracted a host of rough and tough characters, seeking their fortune in the gold-rich land. While lawlessness and avarice were undoubtedly a strong motivation for the majority of settlers, there were others seeking refuge, escape, and a new start in the fledgling town. HBO's series brings together characters from across this spectrum, exploring the good, the bad, and the morally grey, across three dirty, bloody, and foul-mouthed seasons.

The images of *Deadwood's* opening titles—mud, blood, fire, whiskey, women, and gold—speak to the feel of the show as a whole. It is a smashing together of peoples and cultures in a half-built, half-civilized, lawless, and potentially masculine environment. While scholars like Victoria Johnson have pointed to “the national viewing audience's presumed, consensual understanding of the Midwest as a presumptively rural, white, and ‘straight,’ pre-modern, hermetically sealed land of hopelessly un-hip squares,” *Deadwood* presents a very different image of the region and its people.¹ It shows us a melting pot of nationalities, as American, Canadian, Dutch, English, and

Chinese characters establish themselves as trappers, traders, miners, criminals, and businessmen in harsh and unforgiving conditions.

Beneath the murderous violence, gambling, and whoremongering, one of the most interesting aspects of this show is the way in which *Deadwood* is imagined as a place of opportunity, however fraught and uncertain, not only for the white men who make up the majority of the populace, but also to some extent for the small number of women who made it their home. *Deadwood's* frontier capitalism speaks to the possibilities, as well as the more obvious dangers, of a pre-political, pre-civil society, where the controlling forces are individuals rather than public bodies. Interestingly, the opportunities men find in *Deadwood* often grow into great success or official recognitions of status, whereas those found by women are all eventually quashed.

The first season opens in 1876, just after The Battle of the Little Bighorn. *Deadwood* is beginning to form as a community with permanent structures gradually replacing its various tents and stalls. When Seth Bullock (Timothy Olyphant) and his friend Sol Star (John Hawkes) first arrive to set up their hardware store, the only signs of civilization are: Al Swearingen's (Ian McShane) Gem, a saloon and brothel; the Number 10 saloon where Wild Bill Hickok (Keith Carradine) famously met his demise (an event depicted in season one, episode four); and E. B. Farnum's (William Sanderson) Grand Central hotel. The soundscape of these early episodes is as spartan as the setting, as it is entirely constructed from ambient sounds: men and horses, drinks pouring, chairs and tables scraping and banging. It is not until the Bella Union arrives in town with its higher class of entertainments that music comes to *Deadwood* and something resembling a traditional soundtrack is built into the series. Over the course of the show's run, the town coalesces into a tentative form of society. We witness the ad-hoc appointment of several officials, including Sheriff Seth Bullock, and a general move towards the appearance of legitimacy if not its actualization.

Without laws or limits, the denizens of *Deadwood* are free to barter, trade, prospect, and engage in criminal activity largely without restriction. The line is drawn at publicly shooting someone in the back (the murder of Bill Hickok), though excuses are often found, and what happens behind closed doors—such as Cy Tolliver's (Powers Booth) dreadful double murder of Flora (Kristen Bell) and her brother Miles (Greg Cipes) or Al's numerous ordered killings—is never investigated beyond the occasional glance into Mr. Wu's (Keone Young) pigpen, where the unfortunate victims often end

up as dinner. This lawlessness clearly permits if not encourages numerous atrocities, but it also allows the show to engage in an exploration of the grey areas of morality (evidenced by Al's mercy killing of Reverend Smith [Ray McKinnon] and Seth's violent treatment of Mr. Russell [William Russ]) and to show the potential of this lawless space for the empowerment of women.

The women of *Deadwood* live in an overwhelmingly male-dominated town. For a long time, however, there are no formal legal or institutional systems of oppression. Eddie Sawyer (Ricky Jay), a card-shark in the employ of Cy Tolliver, highlights this when he raises the issue of female business ownership at a town meeting and asks, "Will women who pay the license fee have the same right to operate brothels as men?" (season one, episode nine). This suggestion is dismissed by the all-male board of prominent local figures, but Eddie's comment shows that while there are no established laws governing Deadwood, there is a legal space where women are not actively disenfranchised.

Before it was made illegal in most states in the twentieth century, prostitution was a lucrative business that saw many women earning themselves small fortunes. Brothels run by enterprising women were not uncommon, with such famous examples as Josephine "Chicago Joe" Hensley, Eleanor Dumont, and Jennie Rogers, the "Queen of the Colorado Underworld," earning their way to vast independent wealth. *Deadwood's* Joanie Stubbs (Kim Dickens) is herself loosely based on Dora DuFran, one of the Old Midwest's most successful madams. Joanie's position as a madam at the Bella Union and then at her own establishment, Chez Amis, allows her many financial and personal freedoms, including the ability to act on her desires for other women. These privileges and opportunities for advancement were not, however, assured to all working girls. This is certainly true of Trixie (Paula Malcomson), a prostitute at the Gem. Trixie is tied to the violent and controlling Al Swearngen through bonds of loyalty and finance she is unable to break. These bonds see her forfeiting her own happiness, first by turning down an opportunity to start a new life in New York, and then by walking away from a relationship with the besotted Sol Star. Even Joanie's story is, ultimately, not a happy one. In season three, she is faced with a violent financial backer who murders many of her girls, forcing her to close her business. Joanie is eventually able to open a much more socially respectable schoolhouse in its place, but this does not bring with it the same financial gains or any of the attendant opportunities provided by the larger income of Chez Amis.

It was not only prostitutes or madams who sought opportunity in the West. Following her husband's death, the widow Alma Garret (Molly Parker) finds in *Deadwood* a place of rehabilitation and independence. Freed from the mundanity of her marriage, Alma is able to overcome her laudanum addiction and take over her husband's promising gold claim. While much more restricted by social expectations than characters like the swearing, cross-dressing, kind-hearted drunk Jane Cannery/Calamity Jane (Robin Weigert) and the madam Joanie Stubbs, Alma recognizes that staying in the West allows her more freedom than she would find back in New York, and she is loath to give that up. Soft-spoken and unassuming, Alma is not the typical image of a strong, independent woman, but her shrewd intelligence guides her through repeated run-ins with Al Swearingen and alerts her to the true intentions of her debt-laden father. Beneath the rather Victorian façade of her widow's garb, Alma is a sharp-witted, caring, and passionate woman, whose true nature is given room to grow in the chaotic and unconventional space of Deadwood's burgeoning township. Eventually, however, and in spite of the wealth from her claim and her successful opening of Deadwood's first bank (season three, episode four), Alma is forced into another marriage by social pressure, again succumbs to her addiction, and is eventually forced to sell her claim to the ruthless George Hearst (Gerald McRaney) and leave town.

In *Deadwood*, then, the sense of opportunity available to women is often dangled tantalizingly before viewers' eyes, only to be swept away by individual men or by encroaching structures of legal power. No woman ends the three season run any better off than she began it, while male characters (if they have not been fed to Mr. Wu's pigs) have expanded their operations and gained official titles to add to their accomplishments as men of business. In openly exposing opportunity for women as an illusion that can be taken away at any moment, whether legally or through violence, *Deadwood* creates storylines for its few female characters that are as rich and dramatic as those enjoyed by the men. More importantly, the series offers a critique of frontier capitalism and, by extension, contemporary neoliberalism as supposed meritocracies offering equal opportunity for hard working individuals.

HBO's *Deadwood* presents a vision of a fledgling Midwest town which emphasizes the violence, lawlessness, and criminality that almost inevitably exist in such conditions, but also the freedoms and opportunities that run alongside those less savory aspects. Far from being a town full of "squares,"

Deadwood represents a lively and varied populace of pioneers and non-conformists, building an unconventional community based, for good or ill, on individualism and anti-establishment ideals.

Victoria Addis
University of Leeds
Leeds, West Yorkshire, England

NOTE

1. Victoria E. Johnson, *Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for U.S. Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 147.

Our Fires Still Burn: The Native American Experience, dir. Audrey Geyer (2013).

Our Fires Still Burn: The Native American Experience is a documentary that was produced and directed by Audrey Geyer, an independent filmmaker from Michigan whose non-profit production company, Visions, is based in Detroit. Released in 2013, this one-hour film was screened at various United Methodist churches in the Grand Rapids region and shown on the World Channel in November 2016 during Native American Indian month. Its close focus on local American Indians from the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe near Mount Pleasant, Michigan, was praised by the University of Michigan, Native News Online (editor Levi Rickert appears in the movie), and SAY Magazine (a Native American-focused magazine distributed mainly in Manitoba, Canada, and several Midwest states).

Thematically sectioned into chapters such as “Betting on the Future” and “Calling on the Ancestors,” this film focuses on the present situation among a very diverse group of Ojibwa from Isabella County. Geyer presents their struggles as clear consequences of colonial and genocidal policies, such as the 1880s Indian Wars and the Indian Boarding Schools. The documentary then concentrates on methods for healing. Teaching Anishinaabemowin (the Ojibwa language) and values to Native youth is presented as the priority of every member of the community, including tribal council member Louanna Bruner, veteran and head dancer George Martin, and Scott Badenoch, CEO of a technical and scientific innovation company.

Throughout the movie, viewers hear from educators, tribal leaders, entrepreneurs, and family men and women about their histories and person-