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Capturing the Multiplicities of Resilience through Popular Geopolitics: Aesthetics and *Homo Resilio* in *Breaking Bad*

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Abstract: In this article, Grove and Adey's (2015) call to capture the multiplicities of resilience through aesthetics is advanced by engaging with the first two seasons of the television series *Breaking Bad*. This engagement demonstrates that the relationality of geopolitics and mobility is important for resilience. To capture dynamics generated by the interplay of geopolitical contexts and resilient subjectivities through popular geopolitics, Jacques Rancière's aesthetics and the concept of the aesthetic subject are deployed. The emergence of *homo resilio* as a political subject within an imagined American heartland is presented to contextualise the aesthetic reading of *Breaking Bad* that follows. The character Walter White is presented as a paradigmatic example of *homo resilio* to map the geopolitics of this subject position. The paper concludes that race and gender feature at the intersections of *homo resilio*, geopolitics, and cultural criticism, reiterating the importance of popular geopolitics for capturing the multiplicities of resilience.

Key words: aesthetics, *Breaking Bad*, popular geopolitics, resilience

INTRODUCTION

Recently, Kevin Grove and Peter Adey (2015) have identified the importance of aesthetics for uncovering the multiplicities of resilience and its subjects. Grove and Adey (2015, 81) claim that in order capture these multiplicities, analysts must attend to '...a wider terrain of aesthetic, sensual, and visual practices and experiences'. They identify two complementary approaches for this task. The first is to map 'the conditions that...give shape to and help legitimise resilience[s]' to determine how resiliencies '...confront other rationalities, how they de-and-re-code material and affective relations to reconfigure life in ways that produce apparently "resilient" subjects' (Grove and Adey 2015, 81). The second is to undertake aesthetic readings, as defined by the work of Jacques Rancière, to direct 'attention to the limits of resilience', other ways of practising resilience, and the ways in which limits and alternatives have been occluded (Grove and Adey 2015, 82-83). In forwarding this innovative approach, Grove and Adey advocate for a methodological orientation that combines genealogical investigation with forms of sensory perception held in common and 'common-sense'. This combination opens up resilience to new forms of political and ethical evaluation. It also demands that analyses of resilience be attuned to what particular conceptualisations are able to perceive and take into account while also reflexively asking 'what is capable of being recognised as resilience?' Thus, they illustrate the potential benefits of reading individual articulations of resilience aesthetically alongside the particular contexts from which they emerge.

In this paper, Grove and Adey's intervention is advanced beyond its initial focus on sites of formal and practical geopolitics. If their concern is with the multiplicities of resilience, it follows that we must engage with resilience and resilience

thinking at all sites where it is present. Thus, given the importance of geographical imaginations, the omission of popular geopolitics from Grove and Adey's discussion is surprising, for it too is an aesthetic register through which we can uncover the multiplicities of resilience. As an example of the value of aesthetic readings of resilience through popular geopolitics, the first two seasons of the television series *Breaking Bad* are analysed to uncover how a particular form of resilience is produced and secured against alternatives in the narrative.¹

In examining resilience and *Breaking Bad*, the focus is on relational dynamics amongst geopolitical contexts and subjectivities. To unpack the relational dynamics through popular geopolitics, like Grove and Adey, the paper turns to the aesthetic theory of Jacques Rancière but then draws upon Michael J. Shapiro's notion of the aesthetic subject to provide additional methodological precision. What emerges from this analysis is an account of the conditions of possibility for the emergence of *homo resilio*, a resilient subject *par excellence* within the context of an imagined American heartland.

This heartland has been an imaginative space closely tied to resilience, initially through practices of westward expansion and then as a signifier for an emblematic set of values said to produce resilient subjects. More recently, this imaginative geography has persisted albeit in a different form. With an imagined American heartland experiencing economic decline and social upheaval, in part fostered by processes of regulatory reframing that privilege markets and their mechanisms (i.e., processes of

¹ The focus on the first two seasons arose from a question of scope given the richness of the source material, the strong presence of the geopolitics of resilience in the narrative arc, and its culmination with a particular affecting moment in relation to the consequences of becoming *homo resilio*.

neoliberalisation), it has become a site for the emergence of new conditions for resilience thinking.² Along with neoliberalisation and its dislocations methamphetamine economies have developed, both as a means of maintaining resilience, and as a coping mechanism when resilience fails.

Here, a qualification needs to be made. While *homo resilio* as an archetype is closely tied to an imagined American heartland, it is neither the only resilient subject produced within the US, nor is the heartland the only geographic place productive of forms of resilience. However, this is a resilient subject and an understanding of resilience that is deeply embedded into predominant cultural sensibilities. More particularly, *homo resilio* is produced by privileging individualism and mobility while debasing alternative ways of being resilient.³ In addition, unlike other subject positions such as *homo oeconomicus* that may share a similar entrepreneurial spirit, *homo resilio* makes few demands on the state and internalises responsibility for its own self-preservation in the face of systemic challenges.

To further explore the subject position of *homo resilio* within this context, the character of Walter White in *Breaking Bad* is deployed as a paradigmatic example. Unlike predominant cultural criticism that focuses on his potential psychological motivations and intentions, reading Walt as an aesthetic subject reinforces the centrality of individualism and mobility to *homo resilio*, the forms of encounter fostered by this subject position, as well as the pathologies that arise from the understanding of resilience underpinning them. To unpack the multiplicities of resilience in this case,

² See Peck and Tickell (2002) for more on neoliberalisation.

³ Mobility for these purposes is being conceptualised narrowly as a capacity for moment, sharing more with Kaufmann et al's (2004) notion of motility than Sheller and Urry's (2006) 'new mobilities paradigm'.

Walt is juxtaposed with two other characters who point to other ways of being resilient that are more socially embedded and potentially empathetic. This comparison reveals how *homo resilio* and its mode of resilience are able to reproduce and secure themselves through Walt's pursuit of survival (as a protagonist) and the subordination of alternatives, particularly when these are mediated through race and gender.

In doing so, three contributions are made to the study of resilience. First, methodological clarity is provided for how to read resilience aesthetically. This is achieved by demonstrating how contextual factors giving rise to forms of resilience can be combined in practice with aesthetic readings of particular articulations of resilience and resilient subjectivities in popular geopolitics. Determining how geopolitical imaginations, forms of governance, cultural artefacts, and relations of power come together to produce particular understandings and subjectivities within a geopolitics of resilience can thus be achieved. Second, a conceptual advancement is forwarded by drawing upon the notion of the aesthetic subject that has emerged from explorations of popular culture in critical international relations. This not only helps to avoid the latent intentionalism present at times in aesthetic analyses within political geography, but it also provides an effective means by which to reveal the multiplicities of resilience, both within popular geopolitics and along other registers. Third, in identifying and analysing the specificities of *homo resilio*, an iconic resilient subject is uncovered that can be used for comparative purposes to document the multiplicities of resilience in the US context, as well as other jurisdictions where imagined heartlands are present. More precisely, the analysis speaks to the importance of popular geopolitics as a register along which resilient subjectivities are produced, secured, and

potentially contested, thus establishing groundwork for the analysis of additional cultural artefacts to capture the multiplicities of resilience.

To make these contributions, the paper is structured as follows. First, an overview of the resilience literature is presented to make the case for the importance of the relationality between geopolitical context and resilient subjectivities. Second, Rancièran approaches in political geography are engaged to suggest the utility of the aesthetic subject to aesthetic analyses in general, and examinations of the multiplicities of resilience more specifically. Third, the geopolitical context, that is, an imagined American heartland, through which *homo resilio* is produced is outlined. The contemporary connections amongst resilience, neoliberalisation, and methamphetamine within this space are then mapped. Fourth, a reading of *Breaking Bad* is provided that shows how the series (re)produces the predominance of *homo resilio* and a form of resilience that heavily relies on individualism and mobility while securing itself against alternatives. Fifth, the analysis concludes with a discussion of how *Breaking Bad* reveals what is at stake geopolitically when *homo resilio* is a subject through which resilience is inculcated.

LOCATING THE MULTIPLICITIES OF RESILIENCE

Resilience is an important governing concept (Pugh 2014) but its overall impacts are contested. Certainly, resilience has shaped policy in security, development, urban design, public health, and finance (see Anderson 2015; MacKinnon and Derickson 2013; Raco and Street 2012). As Pugh (2014, 313) notes, although there is much divergence, resilience generally refers to a capacity to respond to change(s) such that an entity continues to function. Reducing susceptibility, strategies of perpetual adaptation, and the decentralisation of responsibility for

mitigating disruption generated by environmental, economic, and socio-political contingencies are identified as core aspects of contemporary resilience thinking. It is thus claimed that resilience seeks to manage systemic-level uncertainty (Corry 2014). More critically, resilience has been identified as a means of managing mobility and circulation, inducing a form of biopolitics that attempts to contain the contemporary *residuum* within peripheral sites around the world (Duffield 2012).

However, equating resilience with a universal set of impacts is problematic; as a discursive formation, resilience is not as uniform or consistent an entity across time and space as might be assumed. For example, Jon Coaffee (2013) has identified at least four waves of resilience thinking while Jonathan Joseph (2013) has noted national differences in resilience that are related to the extent to which neoliberalism has become embedded within predominant governing logics. Others have argued that rather than presume connections between resilience and neoliberalism, these should be treated as open subjects for investigation (Anderson 2015, 60). Even the core aims of resilience are divergent. Some strands, in the aftermath of crises, are oriented by desires to return to previous equilibria. Other Hayekian-influenced strands see crises producing new norms to which individuals and communities must adapt (Walker and Cooper 2011). Given differences, and how they become manifest in specific places, the geopolitical effects of resilience should not be exclusively inferred from claims made under the auspices of 'resilience thinking' in policy statements and documents (Coaffee and Fussey 2015; Howell 2015). Context is important because it provides access to the particular which is more than a predominant form of 'resilience thinking'. Context also contains alternatives as well as the phenomena to which resilience thinking posits itself as a response. Thus to avoid treating resilience as a totalising

discourse and to better contextualise its multiple forms, one should critically explore the geopolitics of resilient subjects (Welsh 2014, 21). This includes extending investigations beyond the formal and practical sites of geopolitics. To do so, like Grove and Adey (2015), a turn to Rancière is useful for the purposes of developing a means to capture the multiplicities of resilience and its subjects.

READING THE POPULAR GEOPOLITICS OF RESILIENCE THROUGH RANCIÈRE'S AESTHETICS

Broadly within political geography, Rancièrian approaches to aesthetics have analysed the spatial and scalar implications of 'post-democracy' and its discontents (Bassett 2014; Swyngedouw 2011), identity and the construction of (de)politicised spaces (Dikeç 2013; Ruez 2013) as well as the imagined geographies instantiated by artistic and cultural practices (Ingram 2011). The key conceptual distinction from Rancière that is highlighted in these treatments is between police and politics. To this end, the shared focus is on distributions (or partitions) of the sensible. Rancière (2010: 36) argues that:

The essence of the police...lies in a certain way of dividing up the sensible. I call "distribution of the sensible" a generally implicit law that defines the forms of partaking by first defining the modes of perception in which they are inscribed...A partition of the sensible refers to the manner in which a relation between a shared common...and the distribution of exclusive parts is determined in sensory experience...[it] presupposes a distribution of what is visible and what is not, of what can be heard and what cannot.

Thus, the distribution of the sensible establishes a consensus about 'common-sense' (i.e., unquestionable truisms) and the modes of sensation or 'aesthetic registers'

through which it becomes understood by a community as comprising 'common-sense' (Dikeç 2013, 82; Swyngedouw 2011, 375).

But distributions of the sensible and the political consensus that underpins them are neither given nor natural. They must be policed through rules, regulations, and customs that establish the boundaries of recognisable agents, practices, and spaces. The general acceptance of these boundaries by those capable of being recognised as agents and being located in recognisable places, '...revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and possibilities of time' (Rancière 2004: 13).

Aesthetic analysis in this formulation comprises three central elements. The first is what is capable of being sensed in a community; that is, what can be recognised as existing for, or being felt by, individual bodies and/or a body politic. This could comprise anything from scopic regimes that order visual perception to forms of identity recognised within political discourse. Second, is 'common-sense', that is what is recognised as being irrefutably true, moral, or just, and thus beyond recognisable lines of questioning. Third, are moments where the mutual constitution of common-senses and 'common-sense' are disrupted through the emergence of new forms of recognition. For Rancière, these moments produce politics; by calling into question what may be known and how it is known, novel forms of recognition can challenge the relations of power, perceived as an a-political consensus, upon which a governing order rests.

Applications of Rancière in political geography have been used as a conceptual analytic where politics is equated with actions that seek recognition. Whether it be

overt protest, creative practice, or even violent disorder, politics is seen as a locus of agency that unsettles the status quo by revealing new spaces, subjects, and dynamics. Intentionality is assumed. It is the process of doing, creating, protesting, and speaking, that produces the challenge to the distribution of the sensible. Politics is thus very much an analytic category that can be applied when an action (e.g., a protest), located at a site (e.g., Zuccotti Park), produces subjectivities (e.g., the 99%) that are argued to challenge common-senses and/or 'common-sense'.

Rancière's conception of aesthetics (as the systems and practices shaping recognition) and politics (as disruptions to these systems and practices) can be applied to understanding resilience and resilient subjects. This need not fall into searches for the intentions of rational agents; rather aesthetics can reveal what actions tell us about our worlds that might otherwise go unrecognised. Moreover, the analysis of distributions of the sensible (i.e., the ways in which material and discursive spaces are created for particular forms of living, understanding, and feeling) can be applied to the imagined worlds of popular geopolitics as well as the contexts from which these imagined worlds gain meaning and are received by audiences. But, as demonstrated below, aesthetics can also serve as a methodology, that is, as an understanding of how to uncover forms of consensus and potential dissensus wherever they may be located, regardless of intent.

The methodological stance here pays particular attention to what could be perceived and what is perceived in *Breaking Bad*. In other words, what is directly addressed and what passes without reaction? What is condoned and what is condemned? However, in the spirit of Stuart Hall's (1997: 2) observation that culture is in part constituted by '...people interpreting meaningfully what is around them, and

“making sense” of the world in broadly similar ways’, drawing attention to how *Breaking Bad* is policed is also important.⁴ The aim is to facilitate a reading of the artefact that uncovers geopolitical possibilities opened through actions and shows how the recognition of these possibilities may be foreclosed, both within the aesthetic structures of *Breaking Bad* itself, but also in the ways that the artefact is received through practices of criticism. To meet this aim, political subjects, resilient or otherwise, should be treated as aesthetic subjects.

Michael J. Shapiro (2010, 2013, 2015) makes an important distinction between statistical subjects and aesthetic subjects. For Shapiro, the statistical subject is the disembodied, calculable, rational man (sic) who is both a guiding assumption for, and an aggregate object rendered by, orthodox accounts of the (geo)political (Shapiro 2010, 7). In contrast, by recognising individuals as aesthetic subjects who have the potential to expose distributions of the sensible, the everyday experiences of these individuals reveal important power-relations and socio-cultural dynamics at work. Thus for Shapiro (2010, 7):

Aesthetic subjects cannot be gathered arithmetically because their role is not to reflect individual attitudes but to enact the complex political *habitus* within which they strive to manage responsibilities, to flourish, or merely to survive. In doing so, aesthetic subjects are ‘...characters in texts whose movements and actions, (both purposive and non-purposive) map and often alter experiential, politically

⁴ For more on the construction of common sense, hegemony, and culture, see Bennett (2006); on emotion, common sense, and culture see Ellsworth (1994); on common sense, culture, and meaning in popular geopolitics see Sharp (1993).

relevant terrains' (Shapiro 2013, xiv). It is their interactions, not their intentions, that are important.

In this paper, an aesthetic methodology is deployed to explore how mobilities (i.e., capacities for movement) and actions foster encounters, defined as (in)formal interactions that are directly or indirectly experienced with people, institutions, places, and things. If space provides possibilities for movement, geopolitics, in part, is those practices that channel, manage, and foreclose opportunities to harness these possibilities. In turn, subjectivities are produced through the 'who, where, what, why and how' of movement through space. This focus will show how resilience thinking becomes instantiated and embodied in our social fabric beyond what might otherwise be commonly perceived as well as how the geopolitics of a given form of resilience, the mobilities that sustain it, and its resulting forms of encounter, could be practised differently (Koopman 2011).

Practically, this methodological orientation means abandoning the psychic states of characters as a means of explaining specific behaviours. As Shapiro (2013, 11) argues, the '...movements and dispositions [of aesthetic subjects] are less significant in terms of what is revealed about their inner lives than what they tell us about the world to which they belong.' To understand the world of *Breaking Bad*, analytic emphasis will thus be directed at three inter-related elements. First is the general context or *habitus* that is navigated by the subject as well as the complex relationships that intertwine the imagined world of the artefact with those other worlds that are constitutive of it. The second are the forms of mobility that are accessible to the subject and the shape their movements may take. The third are the types of encounter that are opened within the aesthetic subject's *habitus* by their possibilities for mobility.

Examining the potential for dissensus in a given artefact is also a vital aspect of aesthetics, for the multiplicities of resilience in particular, and political geography and international relations more broadly. Thus, the aesthetic subject is not a set of features that are innate to a character; it is not necessarily the case that some characters are aesthetic subjects while others are not, though what they have the potential to reveal may differ. Rather it is a subjectivity that arises from employing a mode of interpretation that searches for dissensus brought on by ruptures to common-sense(s). For example, as will be discussed below in relation to *Breaking Bad*, who is granted agency? What is presented as normal? What is not commented upon within a narrative? And with whom do we empathise? In sum, aesthetic subjects are important because by invading distributions of the sensible, they are able to '...displace institutionalised forms of recognition with *thinking*' (Shapiro 2013, xv). The rationale for selecting *Breaking Bad* is that for all of its critical acclaim for the complexity of its characters, its attention to detail, and its tenacity in the dogged pursuit of consequences for each and every choice made, its aesthetic subjects reveal a geopolitics of resilience that demands investigation. As suggested above, to understand this geopolitics requires consideration of one of the contexts in which it is located as an artefact: an imagined contemporary American heartland that is the backdrop for the series.

THE CRYSTAL METHAMPHETAMINE 'EPIDEMIC' AND HOMO RESILIO IN THE AMERICAN HEARTLAND

The inward looking imaginative geographies of the United States have arisen, in part, from the lasting impacts of a national mythology formed in conjunction with territorial expansion and perceptions of having 'tamed' a frontier (see Turner 1921;

Slotkin 1973; 1992). The American heartland is thus produced through a geographical imagination that posits places once on these frontiers as particularly emblematic of a set of populist traditions, values, practices, and institutions that are self-understood as quintessentially 'American': pragmatism; toughness; hard-work; family values; and a spirit perceived to be foreign to coastal urban centres. Thus, while historically multiple and amorphous, William Barillas (2006, 4), claims that the heartland is best understood as a 'regional label that associates geographical centrality with a defining role in national identity and emotional responses to place'.

More specifically, the heartland's special place as the nucleus of 'Americanism' can be traced to several historical factors including its simultaneous development with commercial capitalism and the administrative capacities of the federal government as well as its contributions to national identity formation by attracting European migrants from outside of the British Isles (Barillas 2006, 18; Turner 1921, 22-30). But most importantly, the heartland, as former frontier space, '...is productive of individualism. The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control' (Turner 1921, 30). While Turner argued that historically this individualism catalysed the extension of voting rights to some, it was also seen as a potential cause of instability and thus required careful governmental regulation, even as the transience of the frontier dissipated into the heartland. Of particular note for the contemporary emergence of new forms of resilience thinking in this heartland is how reductions in state economic regulation and the implementation of fiscal austerity were further entrenched with concurrent moves to control a methamphetamine economy that arose in the 1990s.

As the American social safety net became more porous in the wake of subsequent rounds of economic restructuring and regulatory reframing beginning in the 1980s, there was a concurrent intensification of the state's policing apparatus (Beckett and Western 2001). The citizen transformed from 'a passive recipient of social rights' into a subject who must 'actively shape their life course through acts of choice in the name of a better future' (Rose 2007, 24; 26). For Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose (2008, 216), the political question became '...whether it is possible to govern without governing *society*, that is to say, to govern through the regulated and accountable choices of autonomous agents...' And from within this governing problematique, 'the values of self-realisation, the skills of self-preservation, self-direction and self-management were both personally seductive and economically desirable' (Miller and Rose 2008, 50).

Within the American heartland, as these processes of neoliberalisation occurred, *homo oeconomicus*, the political subject of classical liberal thought, became *homo resilio*, resilient man (sic). While entrepreneurship and a suspicion against allowing state authorities to act on one's behalf characteristic of *homo oeconomicus* were retained (see Foucault 2008, 226 and Reid 2011, 775), the rugged individualism, stoicism, and innovative adaptability of the idealised settlers of the heartland were also to be embodied in *homo resilio*. These were the traits that made for responsible citizens able to thrive through the moral imperatives of new economies in perpetual disequilibria while navigating social crises that were said by conservatives to be fostered by decades of social change.

The adoption of these characteristics transformed the relationship between the subject and the state. Whereas *homo oeconomicus* was suspicious of the state, this was a

subject who would still make demands on it when necessary — and in doing so, expect the state apparatus to help realise one's interests. In contrast, *homo resilio* was a subject for whom the state and its institutions were not something to which one made appeals. Located beyond the state, vulnerability for *homo resilio* was neither life negating nor life affirming; it simply was. The management of vulnerability therefore was individualised such that aims became more modest and geared towards surviving rather than living well, with a-social imperatives like tax cuts trumping other forms of risk mitigation like social welfare spending. The outcome was that the survival and well-being of the Self, outside of market relations, were largely divorced from the survival and well-being of others.

As in the production of a frontier mythology that contributed to the development of American nationalism, some residents (predominantly white males) were thought more likely to embody the key characteristics of *homo resilio* than others. As Susan Jeffords (1994, 15) argues, beginning in the 1980s, popular culture itself played a vital role in returning to narratives of 'heroism, success, achievement, toughness, strength, and "Good Old Americanness"' by representing the bodies of white men as heroes for this new age.

But this was not just a cultural development under processes of neoliberalisation. As Walker and Cooper (2011, 146) suggest, the governmental move towards the production of *homo resilio* reflected developments within environmental science and economics. Chronic instability and/or dynamic change in systems were conceptualised as the norm; expectations of stability were themselves said to be destabilising. Thus, governing began to shift from facilitating negative feedback loops that might return socio-economic systems into previous states of equilibria to a drive

to develop the ‘...qualitative capacity to devise systems that can absorb and accommodate future events in whatever unexpected form they may take’ (Holling 1973, 21 quoted in Walker and Cooper 2011, 147; see also Coaffee 2013). While governments continued to intervene at the macro-level for the purposes of facilitating capital accumulation, the responsibility for developing qualitative adaptive behaviours to manage inherent crisis tendencies were to be downloaded onto individual agents within these systems (Walker and Cooper 2011, 148-156). To this end, Marc Welsh (2014, 19) has argued that:

the objective of the resilience approach as a technique of governance is to notionally enable individuals, institutions, eco-systems, and economies to be responsible for transforming themselves in the face of a world of contingency whilst also increasing their resistance to exogenous and internal shocks... Resilience is therefore fundamentally concerned with inculcating particular subjectivities that are fit for purpose in this context.

Within this political economy, resilience became ‘...the measure of one’s fitness to survive in the turbulent order of things’ (Walker and Cooper 2011, 156). Drawing upon a geographical imagination, cultural currency, and economic necessity, *homo resilio* was thus a political subject who could ‘...internalise the ideas, activities, and roles associated with resilience’, helping them to circulate and become socially embedded (Malcolm 2013, 318). As such, resilience in the heartland, as an interpretative framework of the socio-political, placed a normative primacy on those things that endured by virtue of their enduring, regardless of any structural advantages or beneficial contingencies contributing to their success. Its end result was the diversion

of ‘...attention from questions of power, justice or the types of (socio-natural) future that can be envisaged’ (Welsh 2014, 21).

From this larger politico-economic backdrop where *homo resilio* emerges as a political subject, methamphetamine usage concurrently resurfaces as a governance issue in the 1990s. But unlike previous drug scares where the spatial and racial imaginaries of the drug war meant enforcement was concentrated on coasts and borderlands, inner cities, and racialised others, methamphetamine did not easily slot into the pre-existing geo-security *dispositif* (see Marez 2004; Campbell 1998; Grayson 2003). Meth usage was found to be primarily occurring in the rural regions of the west and mid-west with what was often reported as a primarily white user base (Armstrong and Armstrong 2013). Similarly, unlike drugs whose presence could be blamed on other states and ‘ethnic’ cartels, methamphetamine production was primarily a domestic cottage industry, dotting the farms, trailer parks, and suburban houses of the imagined American heartland. It was argued that the prevalence of methamphetamine would continue ‘as long as people needed to work long hours in tedious, physically demanding jobs...’ while others struggled to adjust and cope with demands to be resilient in new local socio-economic environments catalysed by neoliberalisation (Rawson et al 2001, 8; Brown 2010).

Methamphetamine consumption was not new to the US. Nor were the moral prohibitions and stigmas associated with its usage. ‘Tweakers’, ‘jib-heads’, and ‘speed-freaks’ had always rated low in the hierarchy of drug use with methamphetamine consumption associated with erraticism and violence (Thompson 1967). Although there were negative associations and social stigmas, addiction experts argued that methamphetamine users had a much longer road to bottoming out than those who

used other illicit substances. It was claimed that methamphetamine enabled users to remain 'employable' for longer than other illicit drugs, was less expensive than drugs like cocaine thereby delaying the negative financial impacts of addiction, and did not pose the same risks of immediate death through overdose as opiates (Rawson et al 2002). However, the visual markers of methamphetamine use, claims about its contributions to infectious disease transmission like HIV/AIDS, and associations with erratic behaviour became ensconced within the popular imagination and circulated through websites like 'Faces of Meth', curated by the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office in Oregon. Other methamphetamine governance programmes, like the Montana Meth Project, problematised methamphetamine use as a 'consumer product marketing problem' and drew upon the look of advertising campaigns used by designer clothing brands to provide morality tales that foregrounded sexual assault, prostitution, mental illness, domestic abuse, and physical degeneration (Siebel and Mange 2009, 410; Linneman et al 2013).

Similarly, a new threat to the prosperous suburban enclave communities and the less affluent spaces of lower income housing alike was identified: the clandestine methamphetamine laboratory. Dangers included the improper storage and disposal of chemicals, toxic fumes, and fires—as well as explosions—from the manufacturing process (Thrasher et al 2009). Fears of the encroachment of methamphetamine into the inner sanctum of the American heartland are evident in on-line guides that detail how to tell if the house next door is a meth lab, or if you are living in a residence that formerly served as a methamphetamine cook.⁵

⁵ For an illustrative example, see methlabhomes.com

But perceptions about the growth of methamphetamine were also productive of the socio-economic context from which it emerged. For example, while increases in the use of cocaine can be linked to an economic up-swing amongst particular segments of the American bourgeoisie in the 1980s, methamphetamine becomes the drug of choice for those people and regions challenged by the decline of real wages, full-time jobs, family farms, manufacturing, and life prospects that accompanied deregulation, off-shoring, free trade, and anti-labour legislation (Deeg 2012, 1255; Ebenstein et al 2014). These conditions and their constitutive forms of structural violence have been off-set within broader political discourses by the mythology of meritocracy that forms a part of the current social contract and notions of 'choice' that are central to production of *homo resilio* (Littler 2013; Roberts and Mahtani 2010, 253). This deflection has great political import. As Dan Bully (2013, 271) has noted 'poverty and inequality [are] entirely absent from the...resilience agenda...as communities and individuals are granted freedom within certain limits, but made morally and financially responsible for their own success and failure'.

While structural arguments about the stagnation of real wages, income inequality, and disparate levels of economic growth failed to gain sustained political mobilisation, the idea of a methamphetamine epidemic requiring intervention took hold despite a dearth of supporting evidence. For example, in 2009, the *National Survey on Drug Use and Health* reported that approximately 1.2 million residents in the United States had consumed methamphetamine in the previous year. A study based on 2005 data estimated that the non-medical use of methamphetamine rate was 0.27% of the population (Durrell et al 2008). Older data that used methamphetamine treatment admissions per 100,000 residents in 2003 as a proxy for levels of use showed marked

regional differences in consumption patterns with mid and western states outpacing those located in the east and south-east (PBS Frontline 2006). Policing interventions into the methamphetamine economy escalated in these regions and over the course of the 2000s, meth lab seizures in the US ranged from six thousand to twenty four thousand per year (DEA 2012).

Yet any geopolitical delineations arising from methamphetamine are not as clearly demarcated as they might seem. On the one hand, Weisheit and Wells (2010, 9) provide evidence that methamphetamine economies are not associated with ‘...traditional measures of social disorganisation nor civic participation...’ that might ordinarily predict high levels of drug market activity. Similarly, in a comparative study at the county level in Arizona, Rodriquez et al (2005, 678) found a negative correlation between levels of unemployment and methamphetamine use. On the other hand, Armstrong and Armstrong (2013, 457) claim that there is a ‘...strong positive relationship between poverty and measures of methamphetamine production...’ However, they concede that ‘the community structural characteristics related to methamphetamine are to a certain extent distinct from those related to other types of drugs’ with counties with higher levels of unemployment having a lower prevalence of methamphetamine-related treatment admissions than those with higher levels of stability (Armstrong and Armstrong 2013, 457). Furthermore, they found that ‘...measures of methamphetamine production and use tended to be highest in counties with larger percentages of Whites and lowest in counties with larger percentages of African Americans and Hispanics’ (Armstrong and Armstrong 2013, 458).

This all suggests that methamphetamine has contributed to the construction of a complex geopolitical space. With a variegated market, direct policing interventions,

and attempts to foster internal regulation through advertising campaigns, an imagined American heartland also began to be 'governed through meth' (Linnemann 2013). Thus, while enmeshed within a cultural history of an American heartland and the rationalities of neoliberalisation, an emerging resilience thinking produced the subject of *homo resilio*, and confronted the demands of methamphetamine governance. With the effects of neoliberalisation revitalising the need for *homo resilio*, methamphetamine served as a potential coping mechanism (for alienated workers and/or those unable to sufficiently adapt to economic transformations) as well as an additional entry point for inculcating resilience via a diffuse set of policing mechanisms. Therefore, as Jessica Schmidt (2015, 420) has argued, resilience can become a response to the failures of neoliberalisation by representing '...adaptive (self) governance...as the new promise of empowerment'. Yet, reflections on methamphetamine and the geopolitics of the resilient subject produced by this new 'empowerment' have been rare. It is into the lacunae that *Breaking Bad* materialises, revealing subjects, encounters, and power relations shaping a resilience landscape.

LOCATING BREAKING BAD

The narrative of *Breaking Bad* in many ways follows the conventions of storytelling within a broadly western cultural tradition (Yorke 2013). We are introduced to a protagonist named Walter White with myriad problems. He is confronted with an inciting incident, a cancer diagnosis, whose apparent non-resolvability requires that he undertake a journey (i.e., to 'break bad') by manufacturing and distributing methamphetamine in order to ensure that his family is financially secure upon his death. Along the way, he faces a series of external antagonists (e.g., his boss at the car wash where he moonlights, drug dealers, his former university lab partners) and crises

(e.g., dead bodies; when to kill, let live, and let die; how to launder money; threats to his life; and marital strains that result from his numerous deceptions). But like any interesting fictional character, Walt's cultivation of his initial lack (pride) in order to provide security proves to be a major source of new threats to himself and his family.

Thus, as in many other cultural artefacts in which the psyche of the main character is prominent, there has been a tendency within cultural criticism of *Breaking Bad* to focus on the inner psychological motivations behind Walt's transformation from tepid high school chemistry teacher into his alter ego, the drug kingpin 'Heisenberg' (Nussbaum 2012; see Meek 2013 for a nuanced take). While this may be a fascinating line of inquiry and mirrors earlier examinations of other characters that might be included into the genre of 'white male rage' (Davies 1995; Kennedy 1996; Lenz 2005) such as Inspector Harry Callahan in *Dirty Harry* (1971), Paul Kersey in *Death Wish* (1974) or D-Fens from *Falling Down* (1993), the interest here is in the effects of 'breaking bad' and the resilience(s) it produces. While Walt's pursuit of security comes primarily through the cooking glass as opposed to an ethos of 'vigilante justice', its poignancy stems from the way in which highly spatialised, racialised, and gendered encounters expose the contours of contemporary resilience in this imagined world. It draws our attention not just to the ways in which many moments of encounter for the past four decades in the United States have been routed through the geopolitical and commercial logics of the drug war but also in relation to the topographical contours of this battle-space itself and its historical trajectories. In this way, *Breaking Bad* at its very best is able to demonstrate how *homo resilio* '...emerges from a historically evolving set of relationships and encounters, not a set of individual attributes' (Shapiro 2013, 16).

Breaking Bad is an artefact that is haunted by that which is not always immediately perceptible, but whose impacts influence and shape the *mise en scene*. While cancer, an analogy for those things that envelop us from within, and corpses, a reminder that bad deeds leave material remnants, are perhaps the most obvious, it is important to focus on the geopolitical elements of resilience that haunt the series, because they begin to reinforce the contextual discussion above. And they speak to the temporalities of resilience; different historical periods may produce different forms of resilience thinking with different milestones, touchstones, and lifespans. As stated earlier, methamphetamine is often represented as a drug of the American heartland. *Breaking Bad* draws our attention to how an (imagined) American heartland requires both a forgetting of how this heartland came to be and a de-sensitisation to the everyday reminders of what once was that are prevalent across living-scapes. 'New' Mexico, the location of the show, was once the Federalist Republic of Mexico, before that Santa Fe de Nuevo Mexico, and has long encompassed other forms of onto-political significance for the Dine, Zuni, and Pueblo peoples. In *Breaking Bad*, attention is also drawn to how it encompasses a set of territorially controlled commercial spaces for the sale of methamphetamine, production and distribution networks, as well as sovereign spaces of border control and policing. Throughout the series, we see the signs of these alternate geographies, their landscapes, their cultures, and their peoples. Indigenous and Mexican (American) characters feature, often along the periphery, sometimes in more central roles. Historical symbols float through the field from the brand of Walt's automobiles (a Pontiac Aztec and a Jeep Cherokee) to, in a sly nod to the *Anarchist's Cookbook*, the use of a Winnebago as a mobile meth lab. We see fusion foods like burritos, hear *narcocorridos*, and witness conflicts over territory.

In these ways, the geographical imaginaries underpinning popular understandings of the US as a coherent whole and the geopolitical positioning of methamphetamine as threat emerging from within this whole are problematised. Attention is drawn to the incompleteness of the US, the necessity of constant performative enactments of sovereignty that are enabled by practices like the drug war (Campbell 1998; Weber 1998). Moreover, despite the mythology of the expansion of sovereign control through the taming of frontiers, *Breaking Bad* makes explicit that the American heartland remains a series of borderlands, contested territories, and competing sovereignties within its internal borders whose spatial configurations are contingent historical artefacts rather than pre-destined and immutable facts.

In themselves, the appearance of alternate sovereignties and territories within a fictionalised US is not particularly unique or remarkable within contemporary artefacts of popular culture. But what these concurrent geopolitical configurations do within the world of *Breaking Bad* is draw attention to the differing degrees of mobility for characters, the ways in which these mobilities are constrained and controlled through delineations of space, and the structural advantages for those for whom the plane of movement is relatively flat. As in the Spaghetti Western, a genre to which the series makes more than the occasional knowing reference, if sovereign frontiers cannot be completely tamed and controlled, the protagonists ought to at least develop an aptitude for navigating through their contingencies: survival is dependent on it.

Walt is able to traverse across these spaces fluidly, navigating their rituals, protocols, dangers, and norms in ways that are not open to others. When he wants to cook, Walt and his partner (Jesse Pinkman, a former student), relocate to reservation land using a Winnebago whose interior has been retrofitted with a meth lab. This

relocation mirrors corporate practices with regards to the disposal of toxic materials (Brook 1998). They distribute methamphetamine on the streets amongst a multicultural assortment of hoodlums, thugs, and dope fiends. As he cooks, kills, and plots, Walt still inhabits the worlds of high school corridors, PTA meetings, and cocktail parties. Moreover, through his familial connection to his brother-in-law, Walt is imbricated within the anti-narcotics apparatus of the Drug Enforcement Administration. While other characters demonstrate an ability to traverse particular spaces, for example we find out that one antagonist was a police informant and another methamphetamine distributor presents himself to the outside world as a small business owner, none shows quite the same dynamic range as Walt. Ironically, his ability to successfully traverse social spaces and capitalise on them is in sharp contrast to Walt's vulnerability within the bad-lands of New Mexico for which *Breaking Bad* is known; during the first two seasons, it is in these landscapes that he comes closest to immediate death, both from the elements and at the hands of others. Still, it is his mobility that enables Walt's resilience, a mobility that is facilitated by his class, gender, race, and educational background.

The converse also holds in *Breaking Bad*. The logic of state sovereignty is transposed such that one can see that controlling or limiting the mobility of others becomes a valuable tool within the arsenal of the drug entrepreneur. In an inversion of the carceral state, Tuco, a rival methamphetamine dealer, chooses to live inside a virtual prison, complete with CCTV cameras, remotely locking doors, holding cages, and armed guards. Walt both imprisons, and is in turn imprisoned, by those who inhabit the methamphetamine underworld. Immobility is equated with death.

It is the über-mobility of Walt, his ability to cross borders that allows for the series of encounters that take place in *Breaking Bad*. And, as stated above, Walt's resilience is linked to this mobility. Thus, an extremely problematic aspect of the series is that in allowing Walt to navigate various spaces of living, the narrative, like *Avatar* (2009), *Dances with Wolves* (1990), and other standard Hollywood fare, falls prey to a narrative conceit where white men are able to integrate, master, and ultimately play a leading role in the cultural milieus of others. Walt is able to out-flank, out-think, and outperform rivals within the methamphetamine underworld in a way that we are led to believe they would never be able to do in the white suburban milieu of Walt.

Moreover, Walt's resilience is vampirically imperial in its spatial consequences; while he vigorously safe-guards his own private life, his criminal activities routinely penetrate into the spaces of others, leaving them physically and/or spiritually ruined. In particular, he shows no respect for the domestic space of his protégée/partner Jesse. For example, although Jesse's house is used to cook methamphetamine, imprison rivals, commit murder, and dismember bodies, Jesse is forbidden from even phoning Walt's home.

Although the initial introduction to Walt's *habitus* foregrounds a series of humiliations both big and small, he gains a voice very early on and expresses opinions, views, and feelings. Racial others in *Breaking Bad* are never given as many opportunities, sometimes to the point of farce as when an elderly Mexican-American suspect responds to police questioning by defecating himself. Krazy 8 (Domingo), another rival drug dealer, is perhaps initially the most fully humanised underworld antagonist to confront Walt, and is treated as such almost right up to being murdered. But then that bond is snatched away as narrative devices undermine his credibility.

Conversely, Tuco is presented as a crude stereotype, but this is then partially rehabilitated by the care, albeit with aggressive undertones, that we see him provide to his infirm uncle. But these are individuals who are in direct conflict with Walt. And these are the kind of people who die in the series, either directly at his hands or due to circumstances produced within the social assemblage to which Walt is enjoined. Their deviousness, and in the case of Tuco, reprehensible violence, means that the audience is not prompted to mourn their deaths apart from the empathetic anxieties that we may feel about the complications that arise from their passing. In the end, they are plot devices whose fates become sealed by choices that Walt has the privilege of making. These choices are the correct ones insofar as they enable Walt to survive, to live to see another day of dilemmas, dangers, and choices. They are also the choices that lead to new social (dis)equilibria that produce the evolving contingencies to which Walt must respond. As the protagonist of the series, we might recognise Walt's moral turpitude, unsettling our feelings of sympathy towards his plight; however, in Rancière's terms, (geo)politics is produced when we start to recognise precisely what makes his breaking bad possible, alternative ways of being resilient that are present in the series, and how these alternatives go unrecognised.

In this respect, a second series of encounters with Hugo, the custodian at Walt's school, provides an important punctum. While he is barely present in the series, appearing in just one episode, Hugo demonstrates an ethos of care, respect, and mutual recognition at a time when Walt is at his most vulnerable. On several occasions as Walt falls ill at school due to his chemotherapy and radiation treatments, Hugo is the one who provides him with some basic dignity. What is present here is a different kind of resilience, one in which precarity, vulnerability, and insecurity can be

mitigated through the quotidian social bonds that we form with friends, family, neighbours, colleagues, and acquaintances. It is a form of resilience built through sociality and empathy rather than individualism. But the conditions for possibility are only fleeting as Hugo gets wrongly accused of stealing equipment from Walt's high school lab, equipment that Walt has himself taken to cook meth. The viewer is later told in passing dialogue that in a subsequent search of his property brought on by his arrest, Hugo has been imprisoned on unrelated marijuana possession charges because he is a former felon. At this pivotal moment, Walt does not reciprocate their social bonds or the ethos of care. Instead, Hugo is left to bear all of the negative impacts of this injustice on his own while Walt remains free to continue practicing his form of resilience.

A third series of encounters in *Breaking Bad* offers another alternative understanding of resilience. These are the encounters that take place between Walt and his wife Skyler. In her attempts to limit his mobility, she can be read as his primary antagonist in the first two seasons. If Walt is the archetypal *homo resilio*, Skyler represents a completely antithetical notion of resilience. Like Hugo, it is one in which sociality is foregrounded in three distinct respects. First, is the importance of familial bonds. Skyler seeks support from family and friends in response to the precarious circumstances she faces. Her relationships with her husband, son, sister, and brother-in-law are positioned as potential sources of strength in contradistinction to Walt's demonstrated understanding of family as at best a vulnerability, and, at worst, the source of intrusive social obligations that hinder his resilience strategies. Moreover, Skyler is open to accepting financial charity from others, a concession that Walt will not accept.

Second, Skyler emphasises the regulative function of social bonds and expectations as she attempts to support Walt through his cancer treatment. From her perspective, Walt's increasingly secretive and erratic behaviour is a source of great worry while Walt himself views her concerns as an obstacle to be avoided through increasingly complex subterfuges. Foregrounding social relationships, she reminds him of his responsibilities to others as a father, husband, and moral being, much to his consternation.

Third, Skyler's resilient subjectivity seeks strength from a moral code that prescribes practices for being a good wife, good mother, good sister, and good citizen. She retains this belief in her moral foundation even when it means failing her own tests of character, as represented, for example, by her relapse into tobacco use while pregnant. In contrast, Walt draws strength from his willingness to traverse landscapes with complete amorality, viewing everyone, everything, and everywhere as a means to be used towards his ends.

Yet, whereas Walt's a-sociality has been celebrated by audiences, Skyler's socially embedded resilience has been less popular. Particularly misogynist readings by vocal elements online have characterised her as '...[a] ball-and-chain, a drag, a shrew, [and] an “annoying bitch wife”' (Gunn 2013). Echoing Klaus Dodd's (2014) comparative analysis of the bodies of James Bond and Q in *Skyfall*, the negative reaction to Skyler White raises important questions about how resilient subjects are gendered. It demonstrates how gender shapes who is allowed to be resilient, how they

are allowed to be resilient, and what kinds of resilient behaviours are identified as pathological.⁶

Over the first two seasons, *Breaking Bad* reveals the fractured geopolitical topography of the United States, its competing sovereignties produced through the political economies of neoliberalisation and methamphetamine, and contending resilience strategies. It also demonstrates the direct and indirect consequences of atomising yourself in response: of becoming *homo resilio*, of being a subject who is defined by privileging survival through a-sociality. In this case, it manifests through a choice to pursue the ultimate form of anarcho-capitalism: drug dealing. Similar to elements within the Alt-Right and Occupy alike who express grievances through an individualised register of being owed something, Walt is the fictional personification of *homo resilio*, one who is prepared to do whatever it takes to survive regardless of the social costs to others (Weber 2014, 235-262). Yet, unlike characters who oppose him, Walt's resilience stems from violence that is both directly administered and structural, with the latter enabling the former.

Breaking Bad also reveals the differences in how segments of society respond to marginality and precariousness without resorting to extreme individualism and the violence it enables—as demonstrated, for example, by Hugo the custodian and his ethos of care for others. And while the embracement of *homo resilio* may bring survival, if not success, to some, the show illustrates the profoundly negative consequences of this subjectivity by disaggregating its negative effects down to the level of the

⁶ In subsequent seasons, these distinctions become less stark as a series of events leads to Skyler taking an active role in Walt's commercial affairs; however, this turn did not improve how she was perceived by audiences.

characters. Lives are lost, bodies are liquefied, and objects literally fall out of the sky as Walt travels across a landscape with no reflection upon its ghosts and hauntings, its processes of production, or the ways in which its competing sovereignties govern, despite the presence of signs all around him, that other ways of being are possible. These alternatives are never affirmed nor are their practitioners positioned as heroic. Thus, despite his actions and lack of reflection, Walt remains a hero within the narrative with whom we are supposed to sympathise. That many cultural critics wish to focus on character motivations and inner psychological states when reviewing *Breaking Bad*, despite such imbalances, is indicative of a much deeper political problem whose effects and violence continue to reverberate.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper contributes to Grove and Adey's (2015) call to capture the multiplicities of resilience through aesthetics by demonstrating that popular geopolitics can reveal ethical and political dynamics that shape understandings, practices, and subjects of resilience in situated places. How aesthetic subjects navigate their fictional terrains and the forms of encounter they experience are an important source of geopolitical knowledge in their own right that need not be reduced to allegorical symmetries between real and imagined geopolitical terrains. Thus aesthetic readings bring sensitivity to how distributions of the sensible shape not only the narrative arcs, language, soundscapes, and/or visibility of artefacts in popular geopolitics, but also the interpretative boundaries within which artefacts may be received by audiences. In doing so, a policing function played by the focus on individual intentions and the means to uncover them, has been revealed.

The production of an imagined American heartland illustrates the ways in which types of resilience and neoliberalisation in the US have contributed to a situation in which this heartland is governed through the political economy of methamphetamine. The ‘methamphetamine epidemic’ challenged longer-standing assumptions guiding the drug war domestically while producing new anxieties, aversions, and forms of intervention that emerged alongside neoliberalisation. Here a desire for the preservations of particular equilibria contested with an admission that uncertainty is the new normal. A political subjectivity emerged from this confluence of factors: *homo resilio*.

In light of this emergence, the aesthetic reading of *Breaking Bad* demonstrates that geopolitics is at the heart of resilience. In this case, it is a geopolitics that is shaped by differential forms of mobility and the types of violence that come from enabling and controlling it. Thus, in some respects, it confirms a core tension identified within broader literatures of migration and bordering practices: resilience often requires mobility but popular sovereignty and security are increasingly about controlling circulation to limit the opportunities for those who might benefit from it (Hodge 2015; Shamir 2005; Duffield 2012).

However, there are potential social impacts for those who enjoy a comparative advantage in their capacity to move, particularly when their mobility is tied to an asocial understanding of responsibility that runs through *homo resilio*. While the character of Walter White may go to the extreme limits of this subjectivity and the less spectacular, but no less violent outcomes of off-shoring and deregulation are well-known, *Breaking Bad* reveals ways in which these practices, and their underlying distribution of the sensible—both in terms of what is taken as common sense as well

as what is sensed—can be challenged. By being prepared to look at all of the alternatives already around us, it becomes possible to transform the active and passive acts of non-recognition that contribute to those forms of violence that help to constitute our own imagined heartlands.

Walt thus produces a politics of resilience that operates both within the fictional world of the artefact but also within its audience; one cannot imagine the series enjoying the same kind of reception if he were African, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, or Indigenous American. Given the predominantly negative reactions to Skyler, the very same could be said if his character were to be portrayed as a woman. Thus, there is a space to consider who has the right (or opportunity) to be resilient in general and who has the right (or opportunity) to become *homo resilio* in particular. Such questions provoke additional contemplation of how resilient subjects fit into the socio-historical trajectories of an imagined American heartland. More generally, it speaks to the relationality of resilience and foregrounds the continuing importance of determining in any given context resilience for whom, in relation to what, for what purpose, and at whose expense (Walker 1990, 6-7)? Thus, as the disciplines of political geography and international relations seek out answers to these questions, aesthetic analyses and popular geopolitics will be central to capturing the multiplicities of resilience.

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