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Curbing Containment: Cold War Studies in the Twenty-first Century

David Castronovo, *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit: Books from the 1950s That Made American Culture*. New York: Continuum, 2004. 207 pp. \$22.95; \$15.95 paper.

Andrew Hoberek, *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005. 158 pp. \$19.95.

Leerom Medovoi, *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005. 387 pp. \$23.95.



Over the last decade, scholars of mid-century literature and culture have produced significant bodies of work that suggest the richness and complexity of the period. Flip missives like Marty Jezer's *The Dark Ages: Life in the United States, 1945-1960* (1982) are being replaced by scholarship as multifaceted as the period itself is coming to be seen. Yes, containment policy loomed and *The Catcher in the Rye* crowded paperback racks, but contemporary work has challenged both the nostalgic views Boomers tend toward and the critical rubrics that have become standard evaluative tools for many scholars. Three recent books promise to revise further our understanding of a period variously labeled "the cold war," "post-World War II," or "the 1950s": Leerom Medovoi's *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity*; Andrew Hoberek's *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work*; and David Castronovo's *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit: Books from the 1950s That Made American Culture*. Taken together, the subtitles of these books invite us to reconsider how the period is most profitably conceptu-

alized. For Medovoi, the unique pressures of cold war rhetoric helped shape the rise of identity and its singular expression—the rebel simultaneously scorned and championed by his (and her, he shows) culture. Hoberek shifts his inquiry from the cold war in favor of a reading conscious of economic and class difference within the nation; hence the focus on post–World War II, a label that evokes not containment but material abundance, the postwar economic upturn that occasioned, Hoberek argues, a transformation of the American middle class that reverberates in mid-century writing. Castronovo, writing an old-fashioned celebration of fifties literature that hums along sans footnotes or works cited, is content to recover the 1950s as such with the aim of proving that the decade was not so stuffy as he supposes others have supposed.

The different labels adopted by these scholars indicate the vigor with which cold war studies (as I like to call it) is being met. In addition to the books under review here, students of cold war culture can pick up volumes as various as Christina Klein's *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (2003), David Seed's *Brainwashing: The Fictions of Mind Control* (2004), Bruce McConachie's *American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War: Producing and Contesting Containment, 1947–1962* (2003), and David K. Johnson's *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (2004). Those inclined to date things tend to credit the renewal of cold war studies to the cultural turn occasioned by the work of Donald Pease and others in the mid-1980s. Pease's classic essay "Moby-Dick and the Cold War" showed how the favorite texts of the fifties liberal critical establishment reflected the values of containment America: after all, when it came to totalitarian bromides and grim soliloquies, surely Ahab could give Stalin a run for his money. Lary May's still-essential collection *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* followed in 1989 and widened the range of cultural and literary inquiry. In 1991, Thomas Schaub's *American Fiction in the Cold War* explained how and why American writers and critics moved from the radical left so devastated by Stalinism to the more accommodating liberal-democratic status quo that Arthur Schlesinger Jr. famously called "the Vital Center." Schaub's book was followed in 1995 by Alan Nadel's enormously influential *Containment Culture*, which so

powerfully demonstrated the pervasiveness of the “containment narrative”—the cultural extension of America’s foreign policy of containment—that even Disney’s *Lady and the Tramp* could be seen to exhibit “sexual containment.” Nadel’s argument was so successful and wide-ranging that mid-century cultural studies seemed forever marked by the long arm of containment.

But not all scholars have been content to let containment stand as the controlling metaphor of cold war life. As Hoberek complains in the introduction to a 2002 critical collection: “While the Cold War culture framework has revolutionized the way we talk about the 50s . . . its dominance as a critical paradigm has produced a certain blindness as well. At its worst, it has become a routinized reading generator: take a 50s text that hasn’t been discussed yet, explain how it reflects an ambivalent liberalism hostile to political extremes (or designates some group as subversive, or denigrates the radical legacy of the 30s), and publish.”¹ Nikita Khrushchev once removed his shoe and thumped it in frustration before the United Nations General Assembly; Hoberek’s point could be no more emphatic had he followed suit: for forward-thinking cold war scholars, the containment model has run its course. In addition to Hoberek’s *Minnesota Review* collection, *Fifties Culture*, at least four other collections have argued for an understanding of mid-century literature and culture that isn’t predicated on what Hoberek calls containment’s “omnipresence and inevitability”: *Rethinking Cold War Culture*, edited by Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert (2001); a “fifties fiction” special issue of *Paradoxa* edited by Joshua Lukin (2003); *Gender and Culture in the 1950s*, a special issue of *Women’s Studies Quarterly* edited by Deborah Nelson (2005); and *Cold War Literature: Writing the Global Conflict*, edited by Andrew Hammond (2006). Medovoi’s and Hoberek’s books are important interventions in this teeming critical field: without relying on the explanatory power of the containment model, these studies nonetheless assume a complex relationship between literature and culture that will continue to reinvigorate the cold war cultural studies paradigm.

Leerom Medovoi’s *Rebels* is a hefty contribution to our evolving understanding of mid-century culture. Sensible, focused, and rife

1. Andrew Hoberek, “Cold War Culture to Fifties Culture,” *Minnesota Review* 55–57 (2002): 146.

with unexpected juxtapositions, the book unfolds through nuanced argument and searching scholarship. Medovoi moves cold war studies in new directions by examining the rise of identity as a concept after World War II and then by showing how the identification of “rebel” was linked to national allegories about democratic freedom. The connection Medovoi posits between the private and the public—the local and the global—depends on a particular definition of identity that the rebel animates: “[T]he politics of identity demand that the sovereignty of the people remain commensurate with the self-determination of its individual members. The collectivity otherwise becomes a totalitarian mass, formed through a coerced equivalence of its members that denies them identity precisely by robbing them of their right to psychopolitical sovereignty” (55).

In his first chapter, Medovoi explains the global stakes of the “psychopolitical sovereignty” that identity makes possible by urging scholars to view the cold war as an “age of three worlds.” Medovoi has advanced this argument before; as he writes in *Rebels*: “U.S.-Soviet rivalry . . . did not play out on a dichotomous globe in a simple scenario of ‘us against them,’ as a ‘containment’ approach to Cold War culture implicitly presumes. Rather, it took the form of a triangulated rivalry over another universe that only now became known as the ‘third world.’ . . . By the mid-1950s, the ‘three worlds concept’ had become the globe’s dominant topological imaginary” (10–11).² To substantiate this claim, Medovoi describes how between 1945 and 1960, forty countries with populations totaling over eight hundred million “revolted against colonialism” to create “newly sovereign ‘national characters’ ” (11). It was these new national characters that served as the most important proxies in the U.S.-Soviet rivalry. In the ideological battle for the third world, he argues, the United States’s own national character rose to paramount importance and was linked on several levels to the rebel: not only was America born of its own anticolonialist revolt, but it was also a young nation ripe with democratic possibility. Whatever its specific manifestation, the rebel functions for Medovoi as a sign of self-determination, an avatar of America’s “perennial spirit of

2. See Leerom Medovoi, “Cold War American Culture as the Age of Three Worlds,” *Minnesota Review* 55–57 (2002): 167–86.

'critical nonconformity'" (86) crucial to national self-image within the three-world imaginary.

The three-worlds theory is a useful departure from the containment model because it understands cold war culture as both consensus-minded and committed to individual determination. In exploring this duality, Medovoi moves away from avenues of inquiry familiar to cold war scholars—George Kennan's Long Telegram and the foreign policy it inspired, for instance—in order to examine how a particular phase of capitalism helped shape American self-image. Reading cold war America as a Fordist epoch allows Medovoi to claim that consensus culture hadn't quite gelled in the ways people suppose or remember: "[A] politically potent discursive formation began to emerge out of the gap between a Cold War political imaginary that envisioned the United States as democratic, self-determining, and agential, and a Fordist economic order whose system of mass consumer standardization posed a threatening contrary national appearance. In effect, this discourse imaginatively split America in two: the America of identity or rebellion, as represented by the subject of youth, and the America of conformity, as embodied in the object world of Fordist mass culture" (34–35). Medovoi's identification of this imaginative split casts cold war America not as a Borg-like monolith but rather as a striated nation both dynamic and conflicted. Such dynamism in turn points to the appeal of the rebel and youth culture: "In all of its complexity, the teenager of postwar U.S. culture represented nothing less than a figure of psychopolitical sovereignty, a Cold War instantiation of [Erik] Erikson's 'freeborn American son' as defined against his antithesis, the compliant youth of totalitarian society" (30).

What is perhaps most exciting about Medovoi's thesis is that it helps us understand how the fifties became the sixties. Describing the ultimate scope of his argument, he claims that by reading the decade as "the inaugural moment of identity" we might understand how it gave birth to "new political potentialities" (49). The ideology of the rebel represents an emergent category of "identity" that prefigured the rise of identity politics in the sixties, seventies, and beyond. In its effort to trace the origins of the sixties in the fifties (rather than viewing the sixties as a reaction to the fifties), *Rebels* represents not only a way to understand late twentieth-century cul-

tural history but also a more complex way to understand the fifties as such.

After establishing the groundwork for his argument, Medovoi offers well-reasoned analyses of cultural materials ranging from Chuck Berry standards to the novels and poetry of the Beats. By situating such phenomena in the cultural matrix that he articulates in his first two chapters, Medovoi at once invites reexamination of seemingly simple artifacts and deepens our understanding of postwar life. A chapter titled “Rock ‘n’ Roll and the Suburban Counterimaginary” is illustrative. While typical accounts of the postwar suburban boom often follow the argument made by William Whyte in *The Organization Man* (1956) that postwar suburban communities functioned as a place of belonging, Medovoi uses rock and roll to understand the suburbs as a staging ground for rebellion: “rock ‘n’ roll allowed youth culture to constitute a Fordist counterimaginary, a way of seeing oneself as simultaneously within, yet implicitly critical of, postwar suburbia” (94). With this idea, Medovoi departs from the more widespread account of rock and roll that suggests that its early commodification made it ideologically paralyzed. Although Medovoi’s idea is intriguing, he sometimes assumes that rock-and-roll lyricists overloaded their rifts with ore (my favorite is his analysis of The Coasters’ hit “Yakety Yak”: since a square suburban dad could hardly be hip enough to know “what cooks,” the song “allowed suburban teenagers to be imaginatively partnered with inner-city youth as escapees from parental mandates” [118]). In the end, one forgives Medovoi’s analytical zeal because his conclusions are so well drawn and ultimately justified by the material he has selected.

From his analysis of rock and roll and the suburbs, Medovoi examines in detail the racial and gender politics of cold war rebellion. He devotes three chapters to adept readings of well-known films (*Blackboard Jungle*, *Rebel without a Cause*, *Imitation of Life*, *Gidget*) and less frequently analyzed films (*King Creole*, starring Elvis Presley, and *Girls Town*, a 1959 version of *Boys Town*). Especially assured is his analysis of *Blackboard Jungle*, a film that began life as a warning about juvenile delinquency but ended up appealing to youth culture as a “proto-teenpic.” Medovoi sees in the film both the imaginative split mentioned earlier and the “generational rifts

accompanying the rise of identity discourse" (164). Through a rich analysis of the scene in which Glenn Ford's Mr. Dadier shows his rowdy class a *Jack and the Beanstalk* cartoon, Medovoi ultimately stakes a claim for *Blackboard Jungle's* importance in the history of identity politics. He argues that the modes of rebellion the film explores grow in importance after the fifties (152) and become manifest in seminal works like Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*. Leaving *Blackboard Jungle* behind, Medovoi also offers solid readings of the "erotics of rebel identity" (188) in *Rebel without a Cause*, racial politics in *King Creole* and *Imitation of Life*, and the girl as rebel in *Gidget* and *Girls Town*.

Of particular interest to students of literary history is Medovoi's suggestion that the identity of the Beat generation did not grow spontaneously but rather was actively created. Supported by readings of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, John Clellon Holmes's *Go*, and Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," Medovoi analyzes how the concept of the "Beat generation" can be traced to identity politics: "the story told by the beat texts is not that of a generation as a *fait accompli* but, on the contrary, the difficult struggle to bring one into being, the embattled process of young people's enlistment into the beat generation, understood as the common identity project of their time" (224). As is the case throughout *Rebels*, Medovoi's sensitivity to the gender politics submerged in the Beat aesthetic is acute; he notes, for example, that in *On the Road*, "A beat boy is a youthful angel who descends on his young male friends and sweeps them away from the trap of their married homes" (230). Thus Beat fraternity is linked to rebellion: picking up on Carole Pateman's work in *The Sexual Contract*, Medovoi argues, "Pateman's insight that fraternity is imagined to originate in the revolutionary struggle against the father . . . allows us to consider rebellion as the central drama of beat brotherhood" (256).

If the point that the Beats were rebellious seems self-evident, take heart, for Medovoi explores in more detail the homosocial politics of the Beat generation, a welcome addition to the work of Suzanne Clark, Robert Corber, and others who have charted the social valences of homosexuality during the period. And it is difficult to argue with his conclusion that the Beats "clung tenaciously to a rigid code of gender value that valorized masculine agency while

devaluing passivity as a feminine weakness" (260). Despite its focus on masculine agency, in the end, Medovoi's analysis of Beat fraternity could have benefited by including the women who witnessed the Beat boys writing to one another. Although readers discover a lone paragraph on Alix Kates Shulman's *Burning Questions* and a sentence on Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters: A Beat Memoir*, fans of Diane di Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik* or Carolyn Cassady's *Off the Road: My Years with Cassady, Kerouac, and Ginsberg* or Hettie Jones's *How I Became Hettie Jones* may want to know why Medovoi chooses not to discuss them, as they all write on the very gendered myopia he describes.

Rebels is at heart a valuable work of cultural studies; as such, its focus is divided: it offers extended analyses of music and film while devoting only two chapters—on J. D. Salinger and on the Beats—to literature. It's hard to call this a weakness because the book is excellent at what it sets out to do, but it may leave certain members of English departments wondering how Medovoi's claims play out in other works of fiction. Old-time Book-of-the-Month clubbers may remember Lieutenant Maryk from Herman Wouk's Pulitzer Prize-winning (and best-selling) *The Caine Mutiny* (1951): when Maryk disobeys Captain Queeg's maniacal orders, thereby saving the ship from certain destruction, was he figured as a rebel? Does it matter that middlebrow Wouk, in contrast to the writers Medovoi discusses, condemns Maryk's dissent? Of course it is never fair to ask a book to be something it isn't—*Rebels* is a masterful study of the texts and contexts it does engage—but Medovoi's thesis is so intriguing that one wishes it could have been given fuller treatment in some other texts of the era.

As Medovoi uses the rise of identity to broaden our sense of cold war culture, Andrew Hoberek's *The Twilight of the Middle Class* rereads canonical postwar texts through the lens of economics and class. Even though Marxism in its various guises has had an incalculable influence on American studies, Hoberek is right to point out that cold war scholars are apt to overlook questions of economics and class in favor of other pursuits. He proves the fruitfulness of turning to such a framework in his central readings of Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*, and Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and

short stories. As this selection may suggest, although *Twilight* flies under the banner of class studies, it is also a book about style; some of Hoberek's finest moments emerge as he reads the stylistic innovations of these works as responses to the nation's changing sense of the middle class.

Twilight's principal argument is predicated on the idea that by the end of World War II the middle class could no longer look to property ownership as a marker of self-definition. This broad change led to the disaffected Professional-Managerial Class (PMC) described in contemporary works like *The Organization Man* and C. Wright Mills's *White Collar* (1951). Hoberek thinks the PMC felt a loss of personal agency when the middle class was no longer identified with property ownership; he further posits a structural similarity between the PMC and writers and other intellectuals who performed mental labor. Hoberek suggests that in the postwar world, "intellectual work was definitively reconfigured as something that took place within institutions" (21). Because of this reconfiguration, intellectuals became in effect white-collar employees who could no longer count on the antagonistic relationship to the middle class enjoyed by the Ezra Pounds of earlier generations. Understanding intellectuals as white-collar employees allows Hoberek to ascribe to them the "typically white-collar sense of institutional disempowerment" (22) familiar to any middle manager in corporate America. Hoberek thus identifies the special condition of postwar intellectual work: seemingly more autonomous than their counterparts at IBM or AT&T, writers and intellectuals nonetheless found themselves operating in the same economic sphere. To assert their individual agency, writers thus created "via style a preserve of autonomy that would distinguish the artist from the organization man" (116).

Hoberek's first object lesson is Ayn Rand's formidable *Atlas Shrugged*, a novel that for him "allegorizes the transformation of middle-class identity" (37). Rand's fictionalized polemic operates as something like an inversion of the 2004 film *A Day without a Mexican*: rather than imagining what would happen if an economy's most exploited workforce disappeared, *Atlas Shrugged* offers a world in which highly visible captains of industry remove themselves from society. Rand's heroes are inventive company heads who have quit carrying the underappreciative masses. Hoberek

argues that Rand's book is more in line with a fifties economic ethos than we may have thought—not only because it conforms to the postwar celebration of frontier individualism, but also because it valorizes mental labor. The market is for Rand “not the source of social inequality but the mechanism for eliminating hierarchical relationships” (38). While Hoberek takes Rand to task for harboring a “flawed picture of post-war capitalism” (41) that ignores the complexities of power politics, he ultimately suggests that her appeal lies in her depiction of a world where people have personal attachment to their work and where they are valued precisely for this work (46). Such wistfulness for a world dominated by highly idiosyncratic, highly respected mental work sounds like a rallying cry for impecunious grad students and three-campus adjuncts everywhere, and in fact Hoberek closes this chapter by insisting that Rand's novel reminds us that contemporary academics have become white-collar mental laborers beholden to the “regime” (52).

In his next chapter, Hoberek analyzes Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in terms of “historically specific concerns about middle-class proletarianization and downward mobility” (54–55). By focusing on the aspects of *Invisible Man* that look like other mid-century novels of “white-collar angst” such as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* or Rand's *The Fountainhead*, Hoberek is able to show how the novel engages the “middle-class tendency to project onto all organizations the deindividualizing white-collar workplace” (55). Such a reading hardly accounts for *Invisible Man*'s considerable complexity, of course, and Hoberek pushes our thinking about Ellison into new terrain. Rather than assuming that all varieties of angst and alienation are created equal, Ellison maintains distinctions among various types of nonmanual work. According to Hoberek, “This allows Ellison to critique a competing—and ultimately much more successful—discourse of race, exemplified by the work of figures like Norman Mailer and Jack Kerouac, that sees idealized forms of African American authenticity as the antidote to white middle-class alienation” (57). Thus Hoberek exposes the racial politics underpinning classic organization-man discourse: *Invisible Man* complicates the “time-honored” notion that “the worst part of white-collar self-alienation is that it forces white people to do ‘black’ labor” (60). Unlike writers who lament the white-collar organization, Ellison

offers a more sophisticated understanding of power, one critical of a logic that labels everything inside the organization bad and everything outside of it desirable (66).

Identity politics take center stage in the next two chapters, "The So-Called Jewish Novel" and "Flannery O'Connor and the Southern Origins of Identity Politics," as Hoberek explores how Jewishness or Southernness might counter or critique "the contemporaneous emergence of the 'generic, abstract cultural nonbeing' associated with the pathologized normalcy of the white-collar middle class" (70). Again returning to the idea that style served as a way to express individualism or autonomy, Hoberek argues that for authors like Bellow and Roth, "the figure of the Jewish intellectual provides the textual bridge between the world of white-collar work transforming Jews into generic members of the middle class and the formal innovations that enable Jewish American fiction to exemplify an appealing ethnic difference" (71). Likewise, Hoberek thinks that O'Connor's *Wise Blood* "abandons physical property as a source of middle-class individualism [and] . . . circuitously regrounds such individualism in the intangible property of cultural identity" (95). Although, as Hoberek notes, O'Connor disliked mass-cult visions of the South (think *The Andy Griffith Show*), she nonetheless "participates with them in the project of imagining regional alternatives to the deindividualizing organization" (100). Hoberek analyzes *Wise Blood* and two of her best-known stories, "The Artificial Nigger" and "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," with the aim of showing how O'Connor's profoundly disenfranchised characters challenge the broader cultural tendencies of organization-man discourse.

For all of Hoberek's examples of the ambivalence intellectuals held toward an organizational culture that figured them as mental laborers, he surprisingly doesn't explore in more depth the notion that intellectuals were both disempowered and disempowering. In other words, they formed their own exclusionary, ideological organization: whether from the Ivory Tower or the offices of the *Partisan Review*, the postwar intellectual establishment issued relatively uniform pronouncements about complexity and taste that amounted to class snobbery. People worth knowing read highbrow works of literature and appreciated abstract art, while the rest of the country fed on *Peyton Place* and *Saturday Evening Post* covers. The contain-

ment model helped us understand intellectual America's hostility toward the middlebrow and kitsch as political: intellectuals had a responsibility to champion individual expression against what Philip Rahv once called "the ruthless expansion of mass-culture."³ So too might Hoberek's analysis have explained the class implications of the mutual disdain that intellectuals and the masses held for one another. An insightful footnote gestures toward the potential of such a reading: Hoberek notes that in Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road* (1961), Frank Wheeler distinguishes himself from his suburban neighbors by reading modernist literature (137–38n87). Hoberek might have explored how a similarly subtle class distinction (if that's what it is) turns up in numerous other works of the era. Consider, for example, Mary McCarthy's *Groves of Academe* (1952), in which Henry Mulcahy is both the poorest member of the English department and a Ph.D. Joyce specialist who, at least in his own mind, is in a different class than his fellow faculty. Or Randall Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution* (1954), a playful satire targeting McCarthy herself and the intellectual work she performed in writing *Groves*. Since Hoberek claims that "the transformation of the middle class . . . shapes all postwar fiction in one way or another" (16), it would have been nice to see more explicit and subtle connections between intellectuals' innovative style and the cultural politics that echoed class antagonism.

Whereas Hoberek sounds the depths of comparatively few representative works, David Castronovo's *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit* is like a road trip through the fifties that honks merrily at every literary attraction. It is a book about the fifties that feels like it is of the fifties: macroscopic rather than microscopic, assertive rather than qualifying, judgmental rather than ambivalent. In cataloguing the "remarkable literary explosion that took place between the late 1940s and the Kennedy years" (9), Castronovo alights on the most salient aspects of two dozen or so books and tells us What We Need to Know about works like *The Magic Barrel* and *Rabbit, Run*. Some of the material is recycled from the cogent, well-mannered essays Castronovo has written for *New England Review*, and it shows: his prose is intelligent, incisive, and reassuring in its depth of

3. Philip Rahv, "Our Country and Our Culture," *Partisan Review* May-June 1952: 310.

knowledge. Although those familiar with twentieth-century American literature may find the book introductory, they will certainly agree with Castronovo's point, that the literature of the fifties was actually exciting. The book's heart is thus in the right place, and it is worth having on a shelf of criticism, if for no other reason than that Castronovo pleases in his choice of materials: it's encouraging to see a critic wide-ranging enough to place Dawn Powell or Nelson Algren within the context of a fifties literary renaissance.

Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit is a different animal from either *Rebels* or *The Twilight of the Middle Class*. It is an era-defining, catchall book in the spirit of Alfred Kazin's *Bright Book of Life* (1973) or Tony Tanner's *City of Words* (1971), if without quite the same inventiveness. A surprising pleasure of reading the book against Medovoi's and Hoberek's is its comfort with aesthetic value judgments. Of Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, for instance, the reader is informed: "The single best stretch of prose in the book has Tom carrying Mahoney's body through swarms of medics and wounded, searching for 'a real doctor.' Close in quality is the recollection of a German boy whom Tom killed and stripped of his gear" (26). It isn't quite clear what sort of "quality" Castronovo has in mind here, and he is prone to more far-reaching statements about the best or most important books of the period. This intrepid willingness to stake definitive claims—often absent from contemporary criticism—is in substance, if not style, the descendant of fifties critics who were perennially concerned with the particulars of worthwhile high culture. Castronovo's arguments are never academic; his skill as a critic lies in offering the Big Picture. With chapters like "Angst, Inc.," "The New Observers," and "WASP, Catholic, Black, Jewish," he aims to explain why certain books mattered and why some continue as "insistent presences in our day" (196).

The drawback of this approach is that readers may be left wanting further explanation of Castronovo's assertions. Consider, for example, his assessment of *The Catcher in the Rye*: "Inferior in quality to the greatest consciousness-shaping works of American modernism—*The Great Gatsby*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *Invisible Man*—it nevertheless has the power to distill states of mind, spark identification, and live beyond its covers" (55). It may indeed be that *Catcher* is "inferior in quality" to these other novels, but again Castronovo is never quite

clear about what he means by “quality”; if one were looking simply at a novel’s ability to shape a generation’s consciousness, then surely *Catcher* is as fearsome a contender as any other. While sensitive readers will tend to agree with Castronovo’s pronouncements, it would still be useful to see them further explained. As he discusses *Catcher*, for example, he first seems to dismiss it as “filled with babbling rather than talk that builds to a climax” (57); but then he concludes that “[a]fter thundering at the world, it offers compact packages of insight” (59). Are we therefore to understand Holden’s insights as “inferior in quality” to Nick Carraway’s? Castronovo implies as much but rarely moves his reader into discussions of why this might be. Thus while it is exhilarating to read a critic so self-assured in his likes (Algren’s *The Man with the Golden Arm* and Mailer’s *Advertisements for Myself* are “demented and brilliant” [94]) and in his studied disapprovals (Ginsberg practices “piety without discipline or decency” [74]), those up on the current state of the field will want more argument and fewer behind-the-podium truisms.

In the end, Castronovo’s book is a twenty-first-century version of a fifties critical sensibility, and is valuable as such. We have the sweep and accessible prose style without being bogged down by an abstruse theoretical apparatus. We have useful ministudies like “The Eggheads,” a readable summary of such luminaries as Lionel Trilling, Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, and Dwight Macdonald. We have cogent connections among disparate works (Cornell Woolrich, Jim Thompson, Patricia Highsmith, and David Goodis all give their own spins on “the contrast between the chaos of the people and the everydayness of the place” [78]). And we have a thousand moments of considered insight. As a story about the capital-L literature of the 1950s, *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit* is worth reading.

Although Medovoi’s, Hoberek’s, and Castronovo’s books do not of course encompass all of what’s happening in mid-century literary and cultural studies, they do evince the growing range and sophistication of the field. Each critic in his own way challenges our understanding of a complicated and surprisingly disorderly period. Come at the postwar world with an eye for identity politics, or for economics and class, or for classifying the sheer volume of works published, and you announce a certain cultural and literary repleteness that demands sustained attention. These books also

participate in the lively, ongoing formation of a mid-century literary canon that, while it will probably always include the heavy hitters, is constantly being revised and rethought. This seems to me only to the good. Whatever the theoretical or methodological particulars, cold war studies will grow only by broaching both new contexts and those texts that have not been written about or that have been written about poorly. We need, in short, even more studies like these to help us transition from thinking about cold war culture as a puzzle of recent memory to understanding it as that most foreign of critical problems—the past.

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