

# **O’Sullivan, S. (2022) *Reality TV’s Real Men of the Recession: White Masculinity In Crisis and the Rise of Trumpism*. Lexington Books.**

## **Review by Jennifer Forsberg**

*Reality TV’s Real Men of the Recession: White Masculinity in Crisis and the Rise of Trumpism* explores the popularity and persistent appeal of blue-collar frontier shows such as *Ax Men*, *Deadliest Catch*, and *Ice Truckers* alongside Trump’s presidency and media presence. The book’s author, independent media studies scholar Shannon O’Sullivan, interrogates reality television from networks such as Discovery and History to identify a cultural trend within American media that presents white, working-class masculinity as a hegemonic model with foundations in frontier violence, white supremacism, and settler colonialism. The book shows how American media conflates gender, class, and race to present audiences with monolithic symbols of power: a troubling circulation of blue-collar, frontier-laden white masculinity.

O’Sullivan tactically mixes methodologies, drawing on literary criticism, sociology, media studies, and cultural studies to parse out the complicated genealogy and representational politics of the blue-collar frontier phenomenon. The study triangulates this phenomenon using three provocative areas of focus: hegemonic masculinity, the historical and ideological conceptions of the frontier, and performativity.

*Reality TV’s Real Men of the Recession* dedicates the most time to defining hegemonic masculinity. As a status-quo gender performative, several chapters address how hegemonic masculinity informs media presentations of white, working men who thrive on danger, violence, and homo-social competition. While attention to this topic often feels more like a literature review than an intervention, the author does work to make the discussion more contemporary by applying an intersectional lens that calls upon both black feminist critics and indigenous critical theorists for perspective. Doing so helps to identify not only *what* constitutes the *real men* offered in the title, but provides *how* hegemonic masculinity becomes the social currency that maintains positions of power in 21st century America.

O’Sullivan reveals how the physical and cultural geography of blue-collar frontier television, including *Ice Road Truckers* and *Deadliest Catch*, among others, dramatize men employed in industries that attempt to control “remote, unindustrialized, and sparsely populated natural landscapes, including forests, swamps, and large bodies of water” through violent competition (p. 84). O’Sullivan equates this phenomenon to the symbolism of the United States frontier through historical figures like Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner’s presence helps to articulate the pervasiveness of a white supremacist hetero-patriarchy that grants privilege to highly individualized white, working men from the late 18th century onward. This historical analysis hypothesizes how white, working-class men maintain individuation by drawing on the concept of frontier ideology (Richard Slotkin) and the frontier’s cultural imaginary (George Lipsitz). Ultimately, O’Sullivan argues that white men of all class positions can draw upon and present

Teddy Roosevelt-like personae to exemplify their masculine resilience –whether danger or economic precarity– and command over nature within settler colonialism. The author stresses that the same is not true for women and people of color who are precluded from individualization, and who cannot transform danger or precarity into social capital.

The book consistently returns to the performative practice of hegemonic masculinity within blue-collar frontier shows, drawing upon scholars like Judith Butler and Bev Skeggs to envision "the stylized *performance* of white, rural, working-class masculinity" (p. 118), often equated to "redneck drag" (p. 127). In the book's most compelling close-reading, O'Sullivan illustrates how the cast of *Duck Dynasty* performs working-class authenticity for social capital. Despite the professional and economic success of the *Duck Dynasty* family, CEO Willie Robertson and his father, brothers, sons, and nephews are presented through symbols of white, working-class, hegemonic masculinity to secure dominant positions in the media. These symbolic presentations are especially remarkable since they tend to be performed by "highly visible and (mostly) politically conservative wealthy, white males, such as Willie Robertson at present, and Theodore Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush in the past" (p. 118). This performativity is also extended to Donald Trump's campaign and election, which touted both everyman and business elite simultaneously. Furthermore, O'Sullivan maps a similar performativity in the frontier-specific imagery in the media coverage of the January 6th Insurrection.

While the concept of performativity corresponds clearly with hegemonic masculinity, the study could benefit from further elaboration on how race, class, and gender are performed in concert, especially with regard to a differentiation between rhetorical performativity and embodied performativity. But perhaps Trump's media coverage alone is a satisfactory yet triggering exemplar of the complex personal politics surrounding performativity. This is one of the book's greatest strengths, as O'Sullivan masterfully blends the academic discourse of high theory and cultural criticism with mass media, utilizing topical and time-sensitive articles from *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *USA Today*. This approach allows O'Sullivan to introduce ideas strategically, placing the close readings of television programs in context with contemporary media circulations and current events. O'Sullivan's ability to provide an example for each concept of the study makes the book accessible, offering a bridge for academic and non-academic readers alike, unpacking high theory with practiced or lived behavior.

The robust source material that O'Sullivan draws upon provides ample support for a methodical extrication of white masculinity in crisis, with the most attention paid to conceptions of masculinity. And while this is a compelling site for interrogating the study's commitment to identifying, examining, and challenging white supremacist, hetero-patriarchal thinking, the coverage could still be more comprehensive given the gravity of the concerns raised. For example, any substantial theorization of whiteness is suspiciously absent. This is particularly concerning given that the author suggests that "classism manifests itself within whiteness" (p. 119). To these ends, the book only recognizes working-class identity as a cultural and economic diagnostic, presented and represented through white, masculine performances of gender. The study overwhelmingly ignores the "white" and "working-class" in the goal of dis-imbricating white, working-class masculinity.

This oversight is especially concerning given the argument's central goal: to deploy intersectional analysis to reveal how "affluent white males...take up white, working-class rhetorical performances...to increase their power" (p. 155). While the book does provide ample evidence of this phenomenon within socio-cultural historical contexts, O'Sullivan could do more to unearth the mono-mythologizing she observes in the contemporary media, which "conflat[es] the white working class, especially white male workers" as "*the* working class even though women and people of color occupy most of its ranks" (p. 155).

*Reality TV's Real Men of the Recession* offers an insightful and compelling study of 21st-century media practices as they circulate and perpetuate performances of hegemonic masculinity in the Trump era. The trajectory of the book's argument is steadfast, and chapters are organized to build upon complex concepts incrementally. But still, the cohesive significance of the study feels more observational than a challenge to the status quo. While witnessing and documenting how white, working-class masculinity is –and has– been deployed in the United States is itself a form of resistance, the book's lasting impact is that of musing potential rather than directive or decisive action.

### **Reviewer Bio**

**Jennifer Forsberg** is a Senior Lecturer in the English department at Clemson University. Her research in American literature and American Studies explores the performance of gender, class, and American identity across literature, popular culture, and art. She has been published in *Persona Studies* (2015), the *Journal of Popular Culture* (2017), the *Journal of Working-Class Studies* (2017), and *The Routledge International Handbook of Working-Class Studies* (2020).