

State University of New York at New Paltz

Breaking Bad and the Intersection of
Critical Theory at Race, Disability, and Gender

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Thesis Abstract: The television series *Breaking Bad* (created by Vince Gilligan) is considered by audience and critics alike as one of the greatest television series ever made. It tells the story of the rise and fall of Walter White (Bryan Cranston), a mild-mannered chemistry teacher turned meth kingpin. He turns to a life of crime after having been diagnosed with terminal cancer, and he sees meth manufacturing as the most lucrative way to provide for his family. It has been nearly a decade since the series finale, yet it endures through sequel films, spin-offs, and online streaming. My thesis investigates the series' staying power, and I would argue that lies in its thematic content. *Breaking Bad* is not just a straightforward story of one man's descent into a life of crime, but it is also a mediation on dominant, repressive power structures. The series offers a look at these structures through the lens of race, gender, and disability through the actions of characters and their interactions with one another.

Keywords: English, *Breaking Bad*, race, disability, gender, Vince Gilligan, Bryan Cranston, power, power structures, television

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Introduction

AMC's *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) is widely regarded as one of the greatest television series of all time. Created by Vince Gilligan, audiences and critics were captivated by the mild-mannered, Albuquerque chemistry teacher Walter White (portrayed by Bryan Cranston) who makes and sells crystal meth to cover the costs for his terminal lung cancer treatment. He partners with his former student, Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul), and hides his double life from his family (wife, Anna Gunn, and son, R.J Mitte) and his brother-in-law who is an agent of the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) (Dean Norris). Walter sinks deeper and deeper into the drug trade, as his morality erodes and he competes against the drug empires of New Mexico. His meth making starts out as a way to cover his cancer treatments but becomes an irresistible avenue for incredible wealth and power.

The series has been highly praised by critics and audience alike. Jonah Goldberg of the *National Review* crowned the show as “the best show currently on television, and perhaps even the best ever” in his review published after the 65th Primetime Emmy Awards Show. Den of Geek critic Nick Harley proclaimed that after the finale, “*Breaking Bad* cemented itself as essential viewing for fans of all forms of storytelling, presenting a character arc for its protagonist that challenged and rewarded the audience for taking the whole captivating journey

with him.” On the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), *Breaking Bad* holds a rating of 9.5/10 amongst user reviews, and is the fourth highest rated television series on the website. It has been nominated for and has won a plethora awards, winning sixteen Primetime Emmys over its five-year run (Academy of Television Arts & Sciences). It is still a cultural phenomenon to this day, having maintained enough popularity from its finale to warrant the spin-off series *Better Call Saul* in 2015, and the feature length sequel film *El Camino* in 2019.

Breaking Bad is an enduring cultural force, but what exactly has made the series so potent for so many years? I believe that the franchise’s enduring legacy lies in its thematic content. The two main overarching themes of the series, I would argue, are power and control. Walter White uses meth making as a way to gain the power to take back control over his own life. Not only is he making a fortune from his illegal dealings, securing the financial security of his family for years after he dies, but he becomes more confident as he continues to live a dangerous second life.

However, these themes well go beyond the scope of Walter’s own struggles in the series. All the principal characters are in one way or another, grappling for control and power in their lives. Jesse is trying to be successful too, but continually longs for independence and a life outside the drug trade. Gustavo Fring (Giancarlo Esposito), Walter’s employer in the meth business (and later, rival), seeks to overthrow his superiors in the Juárez Cartel of Mexico, both out of vengeance and to free himself from their overbearing and dangerous presence. Skyler, Walter’s wife, tries to establish control in the domestic sphere as Walter’s erratic behavior tears their family apart and even threatens their lives. Walter Jr., Walter’s son, struggles to become his own man throughout the series and is physically impaired: his cerebral palsy manifests in slurred

speech and he requires the use of crutches to walk. Power and control in the world of *Breaking Bad* are key.

All of these can be engaging conflicts on their own but *Breaking Bad* often layers these conflicts with critical theory. I would argue that *Breaking Bad* primarily delves into race theory, as nearly all the conflicts in the series carry racial overtones. The Caucasian Walter White squares off against the Black Gustavo Fring and the brown Juárez Cartel. Fring himself is in conflict with the Cartel, who see him as lesser in part of his Afro-Chilean heritage. The predominately white DEA butt heads with the Cartel too, and even amongst their own ranks there is some racial discord, wrapped in humor and irony. Further examples crop throughout the series but *Breaking Bad* primarily engages with race theory through the lens of power and control.

In addition to race theory, *Breaking Bad* engages with other theoretical approaches as well. Disability studies come into play with the presence of Walter Jr., especially in his interactions with Walter Sr. Walter Sr. has a deep-seated obsession with purity and what is considered correct. This manifests as Walter Sr. disregarding his son's limitations and ways of adapting to an abled world, in favor of forcing his son to conform to these standards in the name of self-sufficiency and perseverance. Further, this fascistic obsession with purity and doing things the "right" way is a trait that Walter continually expresses, and even has other characters buy into and engage with it.

Finally, the series engages with theory delving into sex and gender. Skyler White is the most proactive female character in the series. She investigates into Walter's web of lies and tries to protect her children from Walter's lifestyle. When she begins to forgive Walter, and when the temptation of Walter's riches proves to be too great, she helps to keep the truth from her family

and the law, and even helps to launder his money. In the final season, when Walter has complete control of the domestic sphere, she offers resistance in any way that she can, going as far as to feign a suicide attempt to keep her children out of the house. Skyler, I would argue, is a compelling and well-written character, yet is often maligned by fans by how often she comes into conflict with Walter.

Race & The DEA

The DEA is the most prominent law enforcement agency in the series, and their agents make up a good chunk of the main cast. Dean Norris and Steven Quezada star as Special Agents Hank Schrader and Steve Gomez respectively, and they serve as the antagonists of the series as they try to bring Walter White to justice. Their power and authority mirrors Walter's own power and autonomy, as well as that of Albuquerque's criminal world. Hank and Steve's power (in terms of their capabilities, responsibilities, and roles as special agents in the DEA) is stable throughout most of the series, while the power and autonomy of Walter and his criminal cohorts fluctuates and changes episode by episode. The criminals operate at a disadvantage, while the DEA agents have a plethora of resources and skills at their disposal to their benefit.

We are introduced to Hank and Gomez in the pilot episode of the series. We first see them at Walter's lackluster fiftieth birthday party, where they watch Schrader bust a meth operation on the evening news. Schrader highlights the lucrative aspects of meth cooking to Walt:

Walter: Hank, how much money is that?

Hank: It's about 700 grand. It was a pretty good haul.

Walt: Well, that's unusual isn't it? That kind of cas

Hank: Well, it's not the most we ever took. It's easy money, till we catch you.

This scene and exchange establish several plot points and expounds on the show's themes of power and control. Firstly, it establishes that Hank, in part, is responsible for Walter's downfall. Hank provides an inside look at the world of meth manufacturing and it tempts Walter with the incredible amount of money it generates and the thrill it brings. As Hank says to Walter when he offers him to come on a DEA ride-along, "Get a little excitement in your life." Secondly, it establishes that there is a power differential between Hank and Walter. Hank frequently emasculates Walter at his own party. Hank shows off his pistol to the awe of Walter's son, calls Walter feminine and cowardly when he is nervous about handling the gun, and delivers a birthday toast for Walter loaded with backhanded compliments. This scene establishes that while Hank loves his brother-in-law, he can be rude and often throws his weight around.

The next time we see the pair is after Walt is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. He had just quit his second job working at a car wash with an explosive rant directed at the domineering boss of the establishment. This only furthers Walter's desperation to make enough money to cover his treatments and financially secure his family. Morose, he turns to Hank to get some excitement in his life and goes on the ride along. While camped outside the meth house they are about to bust, Hank and Gomez speculate as to what their meth cook looks like:

Walt: So what tells you it's a meth lab?

Hank: Just our snitch. Says some dude who goes by "Cap'n Cook"... lives up to his name in there. Says he always adds a dash of chili powder. [Laughs] You exuberant Mexicans.

Steve: Nuh-uh. "Cap'n Cook"? That's a white boy's name. Dopey as hell too.

Hank: Yeah? I'll tell you what. I got you 20 bucks says he's a beaner. All right

Steve: You're on

This is our first introduction to the DEA on duty, and it is not a positive one. It is made clear that the world they see is heavily racialized and they impose their power through profiling. It is important to note that Hank is white, and Steve is Latino. The first thing that Hank and Steven discuss regarding their target is his race. Hank immediately assumes that he is Mexican because of the signature dash of chili powder he adds. Gomez shoots back that the target must be white because of how “dopey” his name is. By making assumptions about the cook’s race, they are creating a narrative that plays into these biases. Notice the casual racism present in Hank’s dialogue. He lambasts Mexicans for their “exuberance” and then refers to them as “beaners” while he is making the bet. Steve’s dialogue also is racialized, as he assumes that “Cap’n Cook” is just some “dopey” white boy, but it is important to note that Hank is the instigator in this scenario. This exchange can be read as light ribbing between two close friends, but American law enforcement is notorious for the racism that persists within its ranks.

The Drug Policy Alliance (DPA) is a non-profit organization that aims to “advance those policies and attitudes that best reduce the harms of both drug use and drug prohibition, and to promote the sovereignty of individuals over their minds and bodies.” As part of their efforts to promote drug reform, the organization has conducted research on how communities of color, including research specifically on Latino communities, are being policed with regards to drug laws.

In their research, they found that “simple marijuana possession is the 4th most common cause of deportation for any offense” “50% of federal drug cases are brought against people classified as Hispanic, even though this group makes up just 17% of the U.S. population,” and that “Latinxs are arrested at nearly four 4 times the rate of whites for marijuana, even though

Latinxs and whites use marijuana at comparable rates.” To summarize, Latinos are arrested and charged at disproportionate rates compared to their white counterparts. Another plot point later in the first season actually involves racial profiling, which occurs in the episode “Crazy Handful of Nothin’.” Walter steals the chemistry equipment from his school to further his career in the meth business, and Hank finds one of the respirators that Walter had left behind in the desert from the pilot. The school’s janitor, Hugo Archilleya (Pierre Barrera), is a Latino man and is fingered as the prime suspect due to his access to the chemistry supply room and his prior marijuana convictions. Hank admits in the same episode that Archilleya fit the “profile,” implying that the DEA was looking for Latino men with prior convictions. Through this development of the plot, the writers examine the racist policies and practices of the DEA against Latinos and the power differentials between both groups. They also examine the benefits of white privilege, as Hank does not even suspect Walter of being the culprit because of him being a mild mannered, white chemistry teacher.

This scene plays with the racist policing of the DEA, with Hank making jokes at the expense of Steve’s ethnicity. While Steve is not on the other end of the law, the message is sent that there is still racism within their ranks. However, this interpretation of this riffing being wholly malicious may not tell the whole story surrounding Hank’s behavior. Hank’s comment can signal a type of anxiety incumbent upon his position of power, both as a DEA agent and a white man. Literary theorist Gloria Anzaldúa attempts to capture where this anxiety and guilt originates. She writes, “We need you to make public restitution; to say that, to compensate for your own sense of defectiveness, you strive for power over us...To say that you are afraid of us, that to put distance between us, you wear the mask of contempt” (Anzaldúa 838-839). Based on the studies by DSA, federal agencies hold massive amounts of power against the Latino

community, so this targeting of minority groups comes with Hank's profession. If jokes are used to defuse tension, then Hank's trading of racist jokes with his Hispanic coworker can be seen as a way to diffuse whatever racial tensions that exist between Hank's whiteness and Gomez's brownness as they do their jobs. The writers paint the world of the DEA as being one of contradictions. There are close bonds between the agents in their ranks and see each other as equals. Hank and Gomez's bond only deepens and is explored from here. Yet, because of the racialized nature of their job, tensions arise, and the power dynamics of race come into play with Hank's racist comments.

The Africanist Presence of Gustavo Fring

Season 2 of *Breaking Bad* introduces the character of Gustavo Fring to the main cast of the series. Walter White crosses paths with Fring in the episode "Mandala." Walter's *criminal* lawyer, Saul Goodman (Bob Odenkirk), recommends Walter to a kingpin with the capability to move massive amounts of product in a bid to maximize his empire's profits without the risk of being gunned down in the streets, dealing with "tattooed speed freak(s)" in the upper levels of the distribution chain, or being caught by the authorities. Saul refers to the kingpin as an "honest-to-God businessman" and even says to Walter, "he sounds a little like you." They choose to meet at a local restaurant chain, Los Pollos Hermanos. However, the meeting turns sour. Jesse arrives high and agitated, and the kingpin is a no show. Saul later informs Walter that he blew it with the kingpin, and he would not get a second chance.

Undeterred, Walter returns to the restaurant chain and pieces together that the manager of the restaurant, Gustavo Fring, is in fact the kingpin. The mild-mannered, soft spoken restaurateur

is in fact the largest meth distributor in the American southwest. He gets Fring to sit down with him, and the two converse:

Walter: I was told that the man I would be meeting with is very careful. A cautious man. I believe we're alike in that way. If you are who I think you are, you should give me another chance.

Fring: I don't think we're alike at all, Mr. White. You are not a cautious man at all. Your partner was late. And he was high.

Walter: Yes. Yes he was.

Fring: He's high often, isn't he? You have poor judgement. I can't work with someone with poor judgement.

Walter often finds himself in the shadow of Fring, and that is just not in terms of professionalism. Fring is more successful than Walter and hides and manages his empire better than he does. Fring's presence acts as a dialectic for Walter, and this dialectic is complicated because of the characters' racial makeup. Walter is white, and Fring is Black. In her seminal piece of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison explores this dialectic of the Africanist presence in the literature of white America. She theorizes that white writers responded to the presence of African Americans and Africans in the country by creating a set of values defined by their whiteness, which at the same time created a set of values defined by Blackness. This is the Africanist presence.

These speculations have led me to wonder whether the major and championed characteristics of our national literature—individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation; acute and ambiguous moral problematics; the thematics of innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of death

and hell—are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence.

(Morrison 5)

Morrison further argues that this championing of values was a way to cope with the moral failings of the nation regarding its racial dynamics. She notes how Africanist characters are used in literature and defines their usage in four ways. The character serves as “a surrogate and enabler” for the white author, are “used to establish difference” from the white characters and their actions, “used to limn out and enforce the invention and implication of whiteness,” and finally, their narratives are used as “a means of mediation—both safe and risky—on one’s own humanity” (51-53). All of these literary tools that are applied to Africanist characters are used by the writers of *Breaking Bad* to explore the relationship between the characters of Fring and Walter.

In the series, Fring serves as this presence for Walter in all four ways Morrison describes. First, when Morrison uses the term “surrogate and enabler” to refer to Africanist characters written by white writers, she means that “what ways does the imaginative encounter with Africanism enable white writers to think about themselves.” To tease out her point further, white writers use the Africanist presence to explore the nature of white society. Morrison describes the Africanist presence as self-reflexive and cites Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* as an example of her theory, as “Poe uses Africanism to conduct a dialogue concerning American space” (51). Morrison argues that Poe uses this outside perspective to examine American traits, and the writers of *Breaking Bad* echo this through Fring being an outside, Africanist perspective that examines Walter’s traits.

Fring is established as a character that is relatable but not necessarily one that we can relate to. We can identify with his desire for revenge against the Cartel that killed his partner and

his mounting frustration against Walter as he continues to defy him, but Fring is also an incredibly successful businessman, both in the fast-food industry and in the drug trade. Few viewers can claim to identify with his wealth and power. Further, like most American media, it can be reasonable to assume that white Americans are the primary consumers of the series and may not necessarily identify with Fring the same way a Black viewer would. If Walter is to be our audience surrogate and everyman of the white world (or “American Space,” as Morrison would put it) then that world is portrayed as one where people put wealth and success ahead of their own well-being.

Walter often overestimates his talents in the drug trade and lands in incredible danger. The very premise of the show and the continuation of the plot is based on the reckless behavior of Walter: he decides to get in an incredibly dangerous profession and when there are opportunities for him to get out of the trade, he chooses to stay in. This is best seen in the fifth episode of the first season, “Grey Matter,” in which Walter reunites with a former business partner of his who became massively successful. The partner, Elliott Schwartz (Adam Godley), learns of Walter’s cancer diagnosis and offers him a position and full healthcare benefits. Walter refuses however, both out of pride and a love for his newfound lifestyle. He routinely sacrifices “easy” personal satisfaction in favor of the hard and thrilling life of a meth kingpin. In addition, his family and personal relationships routinely give way to prop up his kingpin persona. He abuses and exploits every relationship he has with his family to further his aims to rule the American southwest. The white world is one of exploitation, betrayal, and little satisfaction.

This is put at odds with Fring, who is careful and calculating when it comes to his meth operation. He, like Walter, is in the business for very personal reasons, but these reasons never impede him, save for one hasty blunder he makes that leads to his immediate death. As outlined

above, Walter has an addiction to the lifestyle and a sociopathic tendency to manipulate people. Fring does not appear to be as invested as Walter is, with his cool exterior and ability to handle pressure and threats like a professional. Again, compare this to Walter where he flusters and bumbles his way through the meth trade, putting himself and others in danger. Even when he remedies a situation, a new one comes to take its place through Walter's inability to cleanly end conflicts. Tying this back to the theme of power in the series through Walter, power that white people hold is routinely abused for the sake of self-interest and puts them in perilous positions. Power in the hands of Africanist characters, through Fring, appears to be used more carefully and with better judgement.

For Morrison, the second aspect of the Africanist presence is that it is used to "establish difference, or in a later period, signal modernity" (52). Morrison explores how difference is defined by Africanist characters, whether that is through how their dialogue is written or their socioeconomic position. As for the signaling towards modernity, Black culture can be appropriated by whites as being "hip, sophisticated, ultra-urbane" (52). Difference is established by Fring on all the levels Morrison describes. Gus' speech and actions are defined by his calmness, professionalism, and lack of emotion: This separates himself from Walter, who is prone to outbursts and overreactions, as well as his often-lighter skinned drug dealing constituents. Take Tuco Salamanca's (Raymond Cruz) murderous rage, Hector Salamanca's (Mark Margolis) bigotry, and the Cartel's hedonism. As Morrison writes, "the dialogue of black characters is constructed as alien, estranging dialect made deliberately unintelligible by spellings designed to defamiliarize it" (52). While she is no doubt referring to the writing of Black slang on paper, here Gus' speech is made alien through its properness in a world that lacks it.

Fring is used to establish difference through his speech and behavior. But how does he signal towards modernity in the sense that Morrison describes? The Africanist presence's sensibilities are associated with the modern. There is a connection between Fring's values of courtesy and professionalism that can be associated with modernity of international corporations and capitalism. The series signals that "old school" values consist of courtesy, care, and professionalism in the Season 3 episode "Kafkaesque." The teaser for the episode opens with an ad for Los Pollos Hermanos, the restaurant chain that Fring uses as a front for his activities. An older gentleman with a Hispanic accent narrates the fictitious history of Los Pollos Hermanos. The narrator states he was born in a little village "where life moved at a slower pace, yet felt all the richer for it." His uncles, "The Chicken Brothers" were renowned for the delicious chicken they cooked, and the narrator states that they carry on the tradition of their cooking to this day. The commercial ends with the narrator stating that "Yes, the old ways are still best at Los Pollos Hermanos," and a shot raining fried chicken against a black backdrop. The chicken abruptly fades onto a downpour of Walter's blue meth. Here, a connection is made between the seemingly rich values of the old world that are embodied at the restaurant, and Fring's professional values when operating his meth business. They are one and the same.

Angelo Restivo of Georgia State University makes the connection between Fring and the modernizing forces of capitalism in his work, *Breaking Bad and Cinematic Television*. Restivo connects *Breaking Bad* to both cinema and theoretical texts. He argues that Fring's cutthroat behavior can be tied to global capitalism, with his elimination of the patriarchal, ethnic enclave that is the Cartel, in favor of the neutral spaces of office cubicles under fluorescent lights (Restivo 126). This is expressed through Fring's connections to the German conglomerate, Madrigal Electromotive. The professionalism and courtesy that Gus embodies can be seen in the

smiles and firm handshakes of corporate officers. These are old values, but they signal strongly towards the modernity of corporate capitalism. Morrison's third point is that Africanist characters "limn out and enforce the invention and implications of whiteness" (Morrison 53). Furthermore, she states that "We need studies to analyze the strategic use of black characters to define the goals and enhance the qualities of white characters." Firstly, how is whiteness established in *Breaking Bad*? It is established through Walter White himself, primarily through his actions. He is cutthroat, ruthless, and always trying to get ahead. Family is even secondary for Walter. As he states in the series finale, all that he had done was not for the family.

Skyler White: If I have to hear one more time that you did this for the family...

Walter White: I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it. And... I was really... I was alive.

In short, whiteness is a destructive presence that is self-centered. Secondly, how is this ideal limned out and enforced by the Africanist presence of Fring? Fring himself is ruthless and cutthroat as well. He systematically destroys the Juárez Cartel over the course of Seasons 3 and 4, slits the throat of an enforcer who failed him in "Boxcutter" without blinking, and threatens to slaughter Walter's entire family including his infant daughter, in "Crawl Space." Arguably, these are his most extreme actions in the series. Yet, the first act of destroying the Cartel is done out of love for his partner, Max Arciniega, who was killed by the Cartel. The second action is done because Walter had pushed Fring to the very edge. Walter had killed two dealers that he himself had reprimanded ("Half Measures") and his star chemist, Gale Botticher ("Full Measures") is killed by Jessie in a bid to save themselves from death. The enforcer, Victor, was killed not only as punishment for his failure, but because he had been seen by bystanders. While cold and utilitarian, Fring's murder of Victor differs from Walter's rash and frenzied murders of the

dealers and Gale. Finally, it can be argued Fring's threat to Walter's family is merely talk. Walter has shown an obsessive devotion towards his family over the course of the show. Fring specifically made this threat because Hank was nearing in on discovering the truth of his operation: Walter had been aiding Hank in his investigation to maintain the façade of being a helpful brother-in-law but had also been trying to sabotage his efforts in order to save his life. By threatening his immediate family, Fring thought that would finally cause Walter to stand down and not try to meddle further in Fring's affairs. Not so. Walter, true to his character, overreacts and escalates the dire situation further. He takes Fring's threat literally and launches a preemptive strike against him. He has Hank put under DEA protection with a strategic phone call to Saul Goodman, and works to kill Fring and torpedo his operation, succeeding in his endeavors. For Fring, it is all business. For Walter, everything is personal and must be taken to the most extreme degree.

Morrison states, as her fourth point, "We need to analyze the manipulation of the Africanist experience (that is, the story of a black person being bound and/or rejected) as a means of meditation—both safe and risky—on one's own humanity" (53). Once more, this applies to Fring. Fring is bound by the Juárez Cartel from his first encounter with them: for the price of operating in their territory, his partner, Max Arciniega, is killed and he is forced to operate under their banner. He is also rejected by them, as they see him as lesser because of his Chilean origin. In addition, he is bound to the whims of his reckless and dangerous subordinate Walter, and Walter forgoes any attempt of keeping the peace in favor of increasing his standing in the meth trade.

Much like the rest of the characters in *Breaking Bad*, Fring is used as a cautionary tale about the cost of the drug trade on the soul, and more specifically, the ramifications of engaging

with an individual as toxic as Walter White. Through Walter's risky behavior, such as murdering two dealers that worked under Fring, or killing Fring's chemistry prodigy and other rebukes at his authority, the professional mask that Fring has put up for himself gradually slips. He callously kills one of his subordinates for failing to protect the prodigy, manipulates the naïve Jesse in his gambit against the Cartel, and threatens to slaughter Walter's entire family. We, as audience members, are asked to look at Fring and reflect on the gradual decay of his more human qualities and are meant to feel relieved that we are not as inhuman a monster as he is. Yet Walter, who proves to be far worse than Fring in the Season 4 finale and final season, receives his comeuppance only by the final few episodes. Even then, he succeeds in accomplishing everything he set out to do. We too are meant to meditate on Walter's life and demise, yet he is often portrayed more sympathetically than Gus. In *Breaking Bad*, the Africanist presence is used to explore morality, yet is punished more quickly, and not given as much character as their white counterparts.

Translating Morrison's themes through the lens of power, we see power fluctuate between the characters and through the narrative. Walter and Gus switch between positions of strength and weakness, and Gus lacks the same power over the narrative that Walter has through Walter's designation of being the main character. He gets lucky breaks and more sympathetic treatment compared to Fring but is not beyond the criticism of other characters or the narrative itself.

It's All Good, Man

The Season 2 episode, "Better Call Saul" introduces us to the criminal lawyer Saul Goodman. Saul provides legal services for Walter and Jesse in order to further expand their drug

empire. In his debut episode, Saul devises a scheme to save Badger (Matt Jones), one of Walter's dealers and Jesse's friend, from jail time and any potential information he might divulge to the DEA. Later in the series, he connects Walter to Gus Fring as a more stable distributor that Walt can work with, aids in the laundering of Walter's drug money, and shops for new locations for Walter to cook at after the fall of Fring. These are just some of the criminal services that Saul provides to Walter with his legal expertise. Saul is a standout amongst a cast of richly colored characters. He brings to the show a sense of humor to contrast the dour machinations of the other players. Saul is a brilliant lawyer, but he invokes the imagery of being nothing more than a sleazy strip-mall lawyer. He operates out of a dingy office, wears tacky suits, and runs poorly produced commercials on local television stations. Yet, all of this is part-smokescreen, part-love for the art of the con.

Sleazy lawyer tropes are not the only stereotypes Saul Goodman invokes. In his debut episode, Walter, under the guise of being Badger's father (Mr. Mayhew), attempts to recruit Saul to aid in Badger's release without divulging information about his true identity. This exchange takes place.

Saul: Mayhew. Is that Irish or English.

Walter: Irish.

Saul: Faith and *begorra!* A fellow potato—eater. My real name is McGill. The Jew thing I just do for the homeboys. They all want a pipe-hitting member of the tribe, so to speak.

Here, we see Saul invoke anti-Semitic and anti-Black stereotypes to aid in his business of being a lawyer. Michael Asimov of the Stanford Law School covered the positive and negative stereotypes of surrounding Jewish lawyers and their portrayals on television in the *Journal of the*

Oxford Centre for Socio-Legal Studies. In his study, he took selections of Jewish lawyers in television and grouped them by how they were portrayed, categorizing the portrayals as strongly negative, mildly positive, and strongly positive. Saul (unsurprisingly) landed on the strongly negative portrayals of Jewish lawyers but is given the heading “The Strange Case of Saul Goodman.” Asimov makes note of his double identity and the unusualness of a non-Jew passing himself off as one, rather than it being the other way around. He concludes “Presumably, however, McGill wishes to capitalize on the Jewish lawyer stereotype exemplified in *All in the Family*. Jewish lawyers get business because they are thought to be shrewder and less ethical than other lawyers and McGill definitely wants all the business he can get.”

Asimov also examines the sources of these negative stereotypes surrounding Jewish lawyers. He notes the prevalent anti-Semitism towards lawyers “from around 1880 to somewhere in the 1960s,” citing the historical exclusion of Jews in top law schools and firms and anti-Semitic portrayals of Jews in literature, referencing Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, Isaac of York in *Ivanhoe*, and Fagin in *Oliver Twist*. “Most Jewish lawyers had to compete for clients at the bottom rung of the ladder—personal injury, criminal defense, and the like. The institutions engaging in lawyer anti-Semitism were mostly too discreet to make public statements evidencing their attitudes, but such statements are not difficult to discover,” Asimov writes. Saul himself is not a Jew. As stated by himself, his real name is McGill, and his greed and love of conning people is part of who he is. Yet, he deliberately invokes stereotypes surrounding Jewish lawyers. This includes his namesake, his career as a criminal defense and injury lawyer, his sleaze, and his cunning and wit. As an example of modern anti-Semitism towards lawyers, Asimov quotes former basketball star and coach Michael Ray Richardson. Richardson, in a 2007 interview regarding a contract offer, said “I’ve got big-time Jew lawyers...They’re real crafty. Listen, they

are hated all over the world, so they've got to be crafty... They got a lot of power in this world, you know what I mean?"

When considering Saul's comment, that he "does the Jew thing for the homeboys," Richardson's comment reveals a new side to itself. These comments are not only part of a larger conversation of the modern-day invocation anti-Semitic tropes but are part of the particular dynamics between Black Americans and Jewish Americans. Both groups have been historically marginalized in the United States, and that has resulted in collaborative efforts in the Civil Rights Era. Yet, the path for Jewish upward mobility and acceptance in mainstream American society has been clearer than that of Black Americans. As philosopher and theorist Cornell West in *Race Matters* writes:

[The Golden Era of Civil Rights] is downplayed by blacks because they focus on the astonishingly rapid entry of most Jews into the middle and upper middle classes during this brief period—an entry that has spawned... resentment from a quickly growing black impoverished class. (West 71)

West's critique points towards a tension between the Black and Jewish communities that exists because of how quickly Jews were able to enter higher echelons of white society, while Black people's road to the middle and upper class were more treacherous. Writer James Baldwin, in his 1967 article "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White," expounds on this sentiment.

[I]n Harlem... our... landlords were Jews, and we hated them. We hated them because they were terrible landlords and did not take care of the buildings. The grocery store owner was a Jew... The butcher was a Jew and, yes, we certainly paid more for bad cuts of meat than other New York citizens, and we very often

carried insults home along with our meats... and the pawnbroker was a Jew—perhaps we hated him most of all” (Baldwin).

Baldwin’s essay further delves on the assimilation Jews into white, Christian, American society, but this paragraph establishes that Jews in America had already a predominant foothold in this society by the time Baldwin was a child and young adult, which was in the 1920’s and 1930’s, through the ownership of businesses. Baldwin argues that this resentment comes not only from economic disparities, but also how American Jews aligned themselves with white hegemony and partake in the same racism that white Americans have made. This tension offers a breeding ground for stereotypes, in that American Jews are seen as powerful, “crafty” figures for becoming a part of white society so quickly.

In short, Saul capitalizes on the stereotypes surrounding Jews to draw in business from the Black Americans that hold them. Jews are perceived as affluent, “crafty,” “powerful,” and in control of important businesses within the Black American community. Saul plays into these perceptions with his gaudy apparel, his know-it-all attitude, and the authority granted to him by his profession. Saul Goodman exploits his profession as a lawyer and plays into anti-Semitic imagery to make a quick dollar off of the “homeboys,” as he puts it.

Disability, Purity, and Fascism

Fring and Purity

Breaking Bad hinges on a very important crux. Without it, the plot simply would not be the same. Walter White’s meth is the purest meth in the American southwest. The mythic quality of his product is crucial in driving the plot. His partner, Jesse, tries to fruitlessly imitate the ideal meth early in his partnership with Walter, with his hapless sidekick, Badger, in the episode

“Gray Matter.” Fring hires Walter based on the purity of his meth despite his misgivings about Walter’s lack of caution. Fring even tries to acquire Walter’s technique through his handpicked chemistry prodigy, Gale, and later through Jesse Pinkman. In Season 5, a gang of Neo-Nazis that have performed hits on Walter’s behalf attempt to emulate his meth after his exit from the business. Ironically, they are unable to make meth as pure as Walter’s, and when Walter later seeks their help to kill Jesse, they demand he teach them how to cook meth by way of payment.

The purity of the meth, alongside Walter’s impending death and his brilliance, is a driving conceit for the show. This obsession with purity looms largely over the show, and appears not only in the manufacturing of meth, but also in the racial and social dynamics between characters. Once more, Gus takes center stage in the series’ investigations into race. Firstly, there are his interactions with his superiors of the Juárez Cartel. In the Season 3 episode, “One Minute,” there is a brief flashback scene involving Don Hector Salamanca speaking to an unknown Cartel associate on the phone. They are discussing the status of a distributor who appears to be failing them in some way. Hector refers to him mockingly as the “Big Generalissimo,” a “big fry cook,” and “The Chicken Man.” All these insults point to that this distribution is in Fring, with his implied connections to the Chilean government and his cover as fried chicken restaurateur.

The writers of the series could have simply left it there with Hector’s insults, but they take it a step further and pose the question that Hector’s dislike of Fring could stem from somewhere else other than his performance as a distributor. Before hanging up with the associate, Hector offers this piece of advice to his associate: “Never trust a South American. Dirty, dirty people.” With that line, a new layer is added to both Hector and his relationship to Fring. As Restivo describes, these ethnic enclaves are symbols of older values that clash in the

face of modernity (Restivo 126). With Hector's jab at South Americans, it shows that the Mexican Juárez Cartel is an incredibly racialized group that has a mistrust for outsiders. It is notable that Hector is the only high-ranking Cartel member in the series to make disparaging statements regarding Fring's ethnicity. This again signs towards that Hector is stuck in the past, while his constituents are not as stringent when it comes to interacting with people outside of their ethnic background. Even without Walter's meth, purity is on the mind of more than one character.

Walter, Purity and Disability

Jumping into the present narrative level of the series, Walter brings with him an obsession with purity and perfection. This most humorously manifests in the Season 3 episode "Fly." A fly gets into Fring's super-lab, and Walter is determined to catch and kill it to preserve the purity of the lab, and ropes Jesse into his antics. A less humorous situation occurs in the Season 2 episode "Down," where Walter is attempting to teach his disabled son Walter Jr., how to drive. Junior has cerebral palsy and requires the use of crutches to walk. As they drive around an empty lot, Walter realizes that Junior is using both of his feet to drive to compensate for his limited movement. Walter is indignant that Junior drives the "correct" way, telling him "There's the easy way and the right way, right?" However, because of Walt's insistence, Junior loses control of the car and rams into a traffic barrel.

Walter's obsession with purity does not just affect his philosophy when it comes to cooking meth, but it also colors his interactions with his family. Even before Walter's insistence that Junior must drive "the right way," he takes on a passive-aggressive tone in any slight deviations to his driving instructions. When Junior breaks a little roughly, he tells Junior he

“might wanna go easier on the brake,” he sounds and looks exasperated, as if he were more annoyed that Junior failed to break perfectly. When Junior informs Walter that he had been receiving assistance from his friend Louis for driver’s education, a pained expression crosses Walter’s face. After Junior takes initiative and uses his turn signal, he says, “I’ll stop talking. You know what you’re doing,” sounding rejected and hurt, as if it was Junior’s own fault for wanting to learn. Even the slightest deviations under Walter’s authority are unbearable.

The matter of Walter’s insistence that Junior drive “the right way” signs towards a purity that can be connected to ableism, or, as Restivo claims, “his own private fascism.” Restivo states:

Foucault famously saw Deleuze and Guattari’s embrace of pure creativity as providing us with a handbook for ‘the non-fascist life.’ Fascism here is to be taken as a power that forces creative energies into repressive and exhausted forms, like ‘the homeland,’ and given Foucault’s networked understanding of power, he finds that fascism work by reproducing its structures within institutions like the school, factory, and the family. (Restivo 135)

His son’s disability plays into Walter’s fascism, in that it is something that must be corrected, repressed, or shamed. In the episode “Bit by a Dead Bee,” Walter feigns a fugue state after being captured by the drug lord Tuco Salamanca, justifying his disappearance during his captivity. In a conversation with the hospital’s therapist, he confesses that it was a lie, but with a caveat that he decided to run away from home because of the stressors there. He cites his financial instability, Skyler’s unplanned pregnancy, his career failings, and his terminal cancer. He also mentions, “My 15-year-old son has cerebral palsy,” and leaves it at that. This frames

Junior's disability as a thing that stresses Walter, rather than it being something to unconditionally help his son manage.

This is not to say that there are no difficulties when it comes to providing support to a disabled family member, but Walter centers Junior's difficulties around himself and how they inconvenience him. Again, this scene where Walter is trying to teach Junior how to drive signs towards this fascism. Walter, who embodies an obsession with order, must teach his son the "right way" to drive, and that it is the only way to drive. He tries to frame this as a matter of Junior lacking determination: "Your legs are fine. You just have to stick with it. Don't set limits for yourself Walt. You're all right." When Junior finds a creative work-around to his disability in a car designed for an abled person, Walter shoots down his efforts. What could have been a moment of a father and son bonding is soured by Walter's declaration that Junior's legs are fine: Junior is not allowed to live with his disability. He must be fine, and he must do things the right way. Ironically, this outing ends in failure. Despite having Junior drive just the way Walter wanted to, Junior still hits a traffic barrel. Walter's fascist behavior leads to ruin.

Jesse, Purity, and the Art of Bluffing

The scene that best illustrates the theme of a fascistic obsession with purity, cleanliness, and doing things "the right way," occurs in Season 4 episode "Salud." Fring and his top enforcer, Mike Ehrmantraut (Johnathan Banks), take Jesse down to Mexico to meet the Cartel, with the plan to have Jesse directly cook for them. The trio travels to the Cartel's super-lab, in the show's universe, a meth lab with high quality, industrial-strength equipment. The meth that the users of these labs make is not just meth. Malcom Harris of *The New Inquiry* writes:

When it's 89 percent pure, it's illegal meth; when it's 99 percent pure, methamphetamine is sold by Lundbeck Inc. under the trademark name Desoxyn, for 'the short-term management of exogenous obesity.' Walter isn't making meth; he is manufacturing black-market pharmaceuticals (Harris).

Aesthetically, the Cartel's super-lab is a foil of Fring's. While Fring's underground lab is compact and pristine, the Cartel's lab operates above-ground in a sprawling, seemingly filthy, building. At most, Fring's lab only needs two people to cook Walter's meth to turn a profit, while the Cartel's lab has nearly half a dozen chemists to also (presumably) turn a profit. Before Jesse has even engaged with the Cartel's cooks, a difference between him and Walter and the cooks are established. The two white cooks (one of whom barely passed high school) can make a superior product compared to the numerous, highly trained, and qualified Hispanic cooks. Granted, Jesse has been learning directly from a chemist who has been recognized by the Nobel Foundation for his contributions to a team that won the Nobel Prize for their work on proton radiography. It would be impossible for Jesse to not learn about the intricacies of meth manufacturing. Yet, this scene further inflates the legendary abilities of Heisenberg, at the cost of the skill of these Hispanic chemists.

Then comes the showdown between Jesse and the head chemist. The head chemist sees Jesse as an amateur, as he is unable to synthesize a crucial chemical for the meth, phenylacetic acid. At Fring's lab, it had been provided for him in massive quantities: he never had the need to learn how to synthesize it. Jesse is a brilliant meth manufacturer, but a lousy chemist. As Fring tries to delegate, the chemist continues his tirade against Jesse, and Jesse becomes aware that he is being insulted. He interjects, "Tell this asshole if he wants to learn how to make my product, he's gotta do it my way. The right way." Again, there are those words. "The right way." As we

have seen in Walter's interactions with his son, these words are a signifier of purity and fascism. There is a "proper" and "right" way to do things, and Jesse serves as a gatekeeper to the "right" method. Jesse's retaliation continues to sign towards purity and fascism. Immediately after these remarks, Jesse derides the alleged uncleanliness of the lab, labelling it as disgusting and ordering that he and the chemists will disinfect each and every single cook surface, and clean up any source of contamination. In order to cook pure meth, the lab itself must be pure. Jesse concludes his tirade by telling the head chemist to stop whining, "And do what I say." Jesse portrays himself as the strong man who will lead those under him to success and glory, all rhetoric closely associated with fascism.

This scene is crucial for Jesse as a character. For the entire series, he has been continually overshadowed, under looked, and extremely unlucky. Here, he finally comes into his own as leader and man of his own. The experience that he has picked up from his mentor figures, Walter, Fring, and Ehrmantraut, is put to use in this scene. Yet, there are racial undertones that paint this scene in an uncomfortable light. As Harris describes,

The scene in *Breaking Bad*'s fourth season, when Pinkman — a failure at high school chem — shows up a room of Mexican scientists is full of supremacist glee. The Mexicans can wave their skill and experience around, but the science equipment knows objective quality, and there's no competing with the only white guy in the room.

The blue-eyed, lily-white Jesse storms around the Mexican Cartel's lab, accuses their lab of being dirty, and supplants himself as the head of the operation. He has the head chemist cower to his demands, and the other chemists get right to cleaning. As Harris puts it, this scene seems to be "full of supremacist glee." However, it can be argued that, while incredibly tone-deaf, this

scene is not emphasizing Jesse's skills as a chemist or leader over these Mexican scientists. This argument between him and lead chemist stems from that fact that he cannot synthesize a fairly simple compound, and later scenes in the same episode further downplay his skill as a chemist, and further emphasize his skill as a meth cook. It can instead be argued that this scene is emphasizing Jesse's ability to bluff his way out of danger. He appears to be the imposing *gringo* meth cook, a gatekeeper for "right way" to cook meth, but this is all just a façade. Jesse is putting on the regalia of Walter's fascism to save his own life.

Jesse's ability to bluff is established as far back as the second season. In the episode "Negro y Azul," a rumor spreads amongst Albuquerque drug community that Jesse is hardened, crazed killer for having squashed another man's head with an ATM machine. While present for the man's gruesome death, Jesse had little to do with it. The man, nicknamed Spoooge, was an addict who stole an ATM to break into it. While attempting to breach it from its bottom, it fell on his head, killing him instantly. Regardless, the rumor spreads, and Walter encourages Jesse to use this reputation to scare rival dealers and customers. As Walter put it, Jesse was like a blowfish: a harmless creature that puffs itself up to scare off more dangerous predators.

The truth, of course, was eventually uncovered, and Jesse no longer had this dangerous reputation. Yet, as this scene demonstrates, the lesson stuck. It is important to note when Jesse jumps in and goes in on the lead chemist. He does not speak Spanish and can only go off facial cues and tone to determine how the meeting is going. Even when the chemist is clearly disgruntled towards Jesse, he is kept at bay by Gus' insistence that they are working things out. It is only when he sees the reaction of a Cartel enforcer, Gaff, he decides to step in. Before Jesse tears into the chemist, he takes a brief glance towards Gaff. In a shot barely lasting a second, Gaff turns away from Jesse's gaze, out of either embarrassment at how the situation is

deteriorating, or second-hand embarrassment for Jesse himself for his lack of chemistry qualifications. Regardless, when it is clear that his reputation is at stake, Jesse decides to puff up and intimidate the chemist through the language of Walter's fascism.

Jesse begins to approach the chemist and makes eye contact with him: his body language is tense and aggressive; he is ready to fight. He parrots Walter's fascist rhetoric of cooking meth the right way, emphasizing his authority. Yet, the chemist is undeterred. He reveals he speaks English, emphasizing his control over both the Spanish language and the English language. He can speak to Jesse on his level and is not afraid to come down there if need be. Further, we see Jesse consistently break eye contact with the chemist, while the chemist's gaze is unbroken. Even when Gaff tries to resolve the matter, asking how long it would take to produce the compound, the chemist does not look away as he responds.

It is at this point that Jesse realizes that he needs to entrench himself deeper into Walter's fascism, and attacks the chemists for their alleged uncleanliness, their impurities. This is a huge obsession of Walter's, a chemist, and tries to provoke these chemists in a similar manner. Jesse gives a quick glance into one of their cooking vats but makes no real effort to investigate how dirty the lab is. The only signifier that the lab may be dirty is the many pools of condensation, but little else. Even then, it can be argued that these pools merely come from the environment from where they cook and are completely harmless and acceptable based on the set-up of their lab. Jesse's claim that the lab is dirty is an attempt to further intimidate the chemists into thinking he is an authority figure.

To further drive the point home that Jesse is in fact not the grand white wizard of meth manufacturing, but rather a scared white boy completely out of his element, Aaron Paul throws in a very small ad-lib, but one that emphasizes how out of place Jesse is, and how he is trying to

prove himself as an authority. After he orders that everyone should start cleaning, he throws in a small, “comprende?” towards the head chemist. When Jesse says this line, it does not carry the same weight or tone as the rest of the dialogue in this scene. There is a fairly lengthy pause between when he barks the order and says “comprende,” making it seem like a second thought rather than part of a cohesive argument. Jesse’s voice even wavers as he says this line, further emphasizing his naivety.

It should be noted that none of this rhetoric causes the head chemist to budge. Jesse can make himself seem to be the king of cooking meth, but to the chemist he is nothing more than an ignorant child. The head chemist only relents when Jesse brings up the fact that the chemist’s boss, the head of the Juárez Cartel, Don Eladio, requested that Jesse be brought in to teach them how to cook near pure meth. The chemist only relents after Jesse brings up the fact that his career is on the line, telling the chemist he is lucky the Don “hasn’t fired [his] ass” based on how he runs his lab. The blue meth that Walter and Jesse produce turns in an enormous profit, profits that the Cartel lab is not seeing. Only when it has been made clear that the chemist would lose his job, he relents, and orders his men to clean per Jesse’s instructions. Even when Jesse cooks incredibly pure meth in a demonstration cook, the head chemist continues to disrespect Jesse for his lack of technical skill and inability to speak Spanish. Yet, as Don Eladio points out to him, “I don’t care if he’s a pig farmer. He cooks better meth than you do with all your fancy college degrees. And this one will have plenty of time to learn Spanish.”

Harris’ description of how tone-deaf this scene is in regard to race is not inaccurate. Jesse still ultimately one-ups these highly qualified, college-educated Mexican chemists with nothing more than his own experience cooking meth and second-hand knowledge from Walter. It appears as though Jesse’s personal triumph, in asserting his confidence and authority, is also a racial

triumph. Yet, there is more to this scene than meets the eye. Jesse's authority, for the most part, is a bluff. He invokes Walter's rhetoric of purity to make himself appear knowledgeable, and when that does not work Jesse hits at the head chemist where he actually hurts, which is his wallet. Jesse is only valued in this setting for how well he can make meth, and little else. His victory in this scene lies not only in his skills to cook meth, but how to maneuver through a situation when his life is on the line.

Gender & Skyler White: The White Queen

Walter White is not the only character in *Breaking Bad* that makes a significant transformation over the course of the series. Not only do we see Walter's gradual moral decline and criminal metamorphosis, but we also see the same changes through his wife, Skyler White (Anna Gunn). I would make the argument that Skyler has one of the most dynamic transformations in the series, a transformation that is even more dynamic than Walter's. Walter has a rather straight-forward transformation from loving family man, to a reckless meth manufacturer, a Machiavellian drug lord, to finally a broken man with little to lose. Skyler, on the other hand, starts as a civilian ignorant of Walter's crimes, and attempts to divorce Walter when she learns of them by the end of season 2. From the remaining three seasons, Skyler drifts between a determined collaborator, an unwilling accomplice, and a hostage within her own home. She not only fluctuates between these roles, but also blurs the role of her role as a housewife and mother.

Lara C. Stache, an assistant professor at the Governors State University of Chicago, analyzed *Breaking Bad* through a number of critical perspectives, including a feminist lens. She highlights Skyler's initial role and demeanor at the beginning of the series:

In Episode 1.1 (“Pilot”), Skyler is visually and circumstantially domesticated. We learn she recently quit her job to stay home and work on her writing career...we see her make a birthday breakfast for Walt...and, she is pregnant, which could not symbolize her role as a mother any more clearly. She is the nurturing caretaker for her family, virtually barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen the first time we meet her. (Stache 101-102)

Stache shines a light on how the writers of the series cultivated an image of a domesticated Skyler. Stache uses this initial characterization as the foundation of a larger argument she makes regarding the audience reception of Skyler and her growth.

Skyler is considered by a sizable portion of the series’ fanbase to be their least favorite character in the show. It does not stop at being merely disliked, but Skyler is actively despised by this group of fans. Stache notes that she is a “killjoy” early in the series, being the one to get upset over Walter’s marijuana usage, disclose his cancer to his former colleagues without his consent, set up an embarrassing and uncomfortable family therapy session, and displays a lack of discipline in handling her sister’s kleptomania (Stache 101). She is the “uncool” moral center in the first season of the series, contrasted with Walter’s “cool” and exciting lifestyle of drug dealing.

This intense negative reception towards Skyler came to a head when Anna Gunn wrote an op-ed piece in the New York Times not long after the finale of the series about this matter. It is important to note that this op-ed was written at the time where the internet was fairly young. Actors and actresses now had the chance to interact with their fanbase in a personal manner, and vice versa. Gunn noted how online communities gravitated towards her character, but this interaction was far from positive:

My character, to judge from the popularity of Web sites and Facebook pages devoted to hating her, has become a flash point for many people's feelings about strong, nonsubmissive, ill-treated women. As the hatred of Skyler blurred into loathing for me as a person, I saw glimpses of an anger that, at first, simply bewildered me...Thousands of people have "liked" the Facebook page "I Hate Skyler White." Tens of thousands have "liked" a similar Facebook page with a name that cannot be printed here. (Gunn)

Gunn further describes the vitriol that was directed towards Skyler, and how it evolved into a hatred towards her. Gunn argues the source of their vitriol comes from a displeasure at Skyler's autonomy. "Could it be that they can't stand a woman who won't suffer silently or "stand by her man"? That they despise her because she won't back down or give up? Or because she is, in fact, Walter's equal" (Gunn)?

As Walter states in the pilot, "Chemistry...is the study of change," and Skyler undergoes a type of chemical reaction herself. She breaks out of these initial, restrictive gender roles over the course of Seasons 3 through 5.

The first major breach of these gender roles occurs in the finale of Season 2, "ABQ." Skyler has been wavering in her trust of Walter over the course of the first two seasons, but by this episode Skyler has reached a breaking point. Walter keeps a second phone for his illicit dealings, and Walter divulges his ownership of the second phone while on anesthetics. Skyler follows this thread and completely unravels every single lie Walter has told up to that point in the series. From his fake fugue state in "Bit By a Dead Bee," his lie about how his former colleagues are paying for his treatment, Walter's faking a trip to his mother's in order to cook massive amounts of meth with Jesse in "4 Days Out," Skyler investigates all of it and finds the

truth. Here, Skyler definitively makes the leap from being a disgruntled housewife to a more independent woman.

Come Season 3, Walter is out of the house and lives alone in an apartment and Skyler is filing for divorce. In a desperate attempt to get closer to Skyler and return to normalcy, Walter breaks back into his own house in "I.F.T." Skyler, upon seeing Walter, calls the authorities. Unfortunately for Skyler, the police cannot kick him out due to a legal loophole of sorts: because Walter's name is on lease, he has not trespassed on his own home. He is not behaving belligerently either, so they police have no grounds to remove him. Skyler has a chance to inform the authorities of his criminal behavior but chooses not to in order to preserve the unity of the family. Patriarchal forces are at work against Skyler in this scene. The written law is on the side of her husband, even when the officers are sympathetic to her dilemma. Skyler has been forced back into her role as housewife but finds a way to retaliate against Walter's chauvinism. In the midst of all this, she has an affair with her boss, Ted Beneke, a recurring character, and owner of a local manufacturing company. The two characters have had chemistry over Season 2, and Skyler is the one to initiate the affair. After the two have sex, Skyler returns home to find Walter preparing dinner, a gesture he is performing to earn favor with her. As Walter is babbling away about working things out between the two, Skyler bluntly tells him: "I f-cked Ted." Walter is left stunned and wounded. Skyler's act of beginning this affair is emblematic of her further discarding her role as Walter's wife. In this moment, she not only refuses to stand by Walter's side, but she also tries to hurt him.

However, as the season progresses, Skyler eventually warms back up to Walter. She comes to view what Walter has done as a kind of necessary evil, or at the very least an evil done for the right cause. Despite everything, he is still providing for his family: the importance of

family is a trait that the White couple shares. Through Seasons 3 and 4, Skyler is not as brazen and rebellious as she is in “I.F.T.” In fact, she goes back to being the matriarch of the family, but it is twisted and distorted. She falls back in the expected gender role of holding the family together, but she does that through breaking the law and covering up Walter’s crimes.

The Season 4 episode “Open House” emphasizes the lengths Skyler goes to provide for her family and maintain the façade of normalcy through her efforts to turn a local car wash into a front to launder Walter’s drug money. For the past few episodes, Skyler has set her sights on this car wash, and is determined to buy it. This is in part because the owner of the carwash, Bogdan Wolynetz (Marius Stan), used to be Walter’s boss and would continually mistreat him.

In this episode, Skyler eagerly engages with Saul Goodman about ways to illegally tip the scales in her favor. Saul, the shadiest character in the series, even tells Walter that she is a keeper for her gusto. Skyler devises a scheme to have one of Saul’s cronies, Kuby (Bill Burr), pose as an environmental auditor and have the wash shut down on the basis that it is contaminating the property and the groundwater. Skyler spoon-feeds Kuby lines and environmental laws and codes over a wireless earpiece to trick Bogdan to think his car wash is about to be shut down, forcing him to sell. The duality of Skyler is emphasized in this scene. She reads off these environmental codes to falsely shut down a business, sitting in her car with her baby Holly in the backseat, tending to her and making sure she is comfortable. Skyler is a clever criminal, willing to go above and beyond to create elaborate deceptions to undermine the law. Skyler is also a caring and loving mother, keeping her children content and close to her, and the family unit together. Skyler undergoes a dramatic evolution in the series, first as a normal housewife, then a rebellious woman on the cusp of divorcing her criminal husband, then finally an accomplice and participant

in his crimes. Here, the writers present a character that breaks down and transforms the gendered expectations put on her, disobeying patriarchal power structures.

Conclusion

Breaking Bad engages with critical theory surrounding race, disability, and gender, and provides us insight in the inner workings of power dynamics and critiques of mainstream societal beliefs. Through characters like Fring, Hank, Jesse, and Saul, we see how characters navigate a world characterized by race and how it's perceived. Through Walter Jr, viewers observe how ableism is constructed in the home, and how it limits the creativity and self-expression of people who do have a disability. Finally, Skyler shifts and bends gender roles and subverts the expectations that are laid before her as Walter's wife. Whether that is the destructive nature of white colonialism, ableist dogma, or restrictive gender roles, *Breaking Bad* presents us subversions or refutations to these beliefs and views through its well thought out characters and their interactions.

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