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The Eastern American Studies Association and the American Studies Program at Penn State Harrisburg are pleased to present the fifth issue of *New Errands*, an online journal that publishes exemplary American Studies work by undergraduate students.

Seeking to develop the next generation of Americanists, *New Errands'* mission is both to provide a venue for the publication of important original scholarship by emerging young scholars and to provide a teaching resource for instructors of American Studies looking for exemplary work to use in the classroom.

New Errands will be published semi-annually, after the end of each academic semester. The goal of this timetable will be to collect and publish essays produced during the previous term, so that they can be made available as quickly as possible for use in the following term. We encourage both self-submission by undergraduate students and nominated submissions by instructional faculty. They must have an American focus, but can employ a variety of disciplinary methods across transnational fields. Submissions can be emailed as Word documents to: newerrandsjournal@gmail.com.

Essays can be of any length, but they must have a research focus. Any visual images should be placed at the end of the manuscript, and tags should be placed in the text to indicate the intended placement of each image. Manuscripts should conform to Chicago 17th edition author-date guidelines. Endnotes should be utilized for substantive content.

This volume includes essays in both Chicago style citation formats (notes and bibliography and author-date) as a pedagogical tool and a mark of change in the journal's format.

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For further information about the Eastern American Studies Association and the EASA undergraduate honors society, please visit: <http://harrisburg.psu.edu/eastern-american-studies-association>.

A Message from the Editor—

New Errands is proud to present papers that demonstrate exciting new directions in American Studies, including a mixture of the outstanding papers submitted by undergraduates from around the United States. The papers in this edition have been selected because they represent exemplary undergraduate research into American Culture and History; each demonstrates an appreciation for and critical understanding of the field of American Studies.

It is our pleasure to continue to encourage undergraduates to pursue research into American culture. By publishing the exceptional work of undergraduate students, it is our hope here at New Errands to support and encourage future scholars in their research related endeavors. It is an honor for us to continue to publish truly remarkable undergraduate research.

Sean Edward Dixon

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Black Culture? I know that's Right! The Commodification of the Jordan 1 Sneaker, and the Subculture Behind It

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INTRODUCTION

To most Americans, Michael Jordan is a household name (See Figure 1.1). Jordan first became widely known at the start of his collegiate basketball career at the University of North Carolina in the 1980s. He signed a deal with the Nike shoe company that would eventually change the course of his life and the course of sneaker culture around the world. A new up-and-coming star in the league, Nike took a chance, and it paid off for both parties. The first pair of “Air Jordan’s” were released to the public on April 1, 1985.

Jordan’s success as a basketball star in the National Basketball Association (NBA) in the following decades opened up the commercialized sphere of branding and trademarks even further. Over the 21st century, Michael Jordan has become an emblem throughout sporting culture (Andrews 2001). And Air Jordans became a staple of sneaker culture. Originally sneaker culture evolved within hip-hop culture, as a way of expressing the love of the game, of basketball, stars, and the attitudes of young people who were keen on the street (Yuanbo Zhang 2020). This hobby evolved into modern-day sneaker culture (Yuanbo Zhang 2020).

Jordan is not alone, however, is commodifying his image. African American culture overall has mastered what it means to be a part of the marketplace (Henderson and Drake 2020). *In Authentic Black Cool? Branding and Trademarks in Contemporary African American Culture*, Richard Schur explains that, “stars have allowed companies to use their personas and street credibility to gain income and visibility, while the companies have embraced new

identities and reached a broader range of consumers (Henderson and Drake 2020).” In the case of Michael Jordan his persona carried the brand of Nike, and continues to do so, through the Jordan 1 shoe. This hypervisibility of Blackness on such a wide scale is inescapable from white consumption. Because of Jordan’s influence, Nike had no choice but to brand around him, but through this created a new identity for themselves. This slightly tweaked, and watered-down identity arrives us to mass inclusivity; disregarding the original form, identity, and accessibility of the product. This parody display now becomes the new norm society adapts too on a mass level.

Sneaker Subculture: "Yeah I'm a sneakerhead what about it?"

The definitions of subcultures are constantly evolving. The development of the subcultural theory was in the 1920s by sociology scholars at the Chicago School (Muggleton, Hall, and Haenfler, n.d.). They explored the existence of deviant behavior and discussed deviance as a product of social problems within society (Muggleton, Hall, and Haenfler, n.d.). In the 1960s, The Birmingham School added to the idea of subcultural theory, investigating how individuals joined groups that participated in collective forms of deviance, referred to as subcultures (Muggleton, Hall, and Haenfler, n.d.). In layman's terms, subculturists share an identity, values, practices, and cultural objects (Muggleton, Hall, and Haenfler, n.d.). Subcultures do not consist of formal leadership, formal membership, or any explicit organizational structure (Muggleton, Hall, and Haenfler, n.d.). It is often fluid of who and what embodies a subculture (Muggleton, Hall, and Haenfler, n.d.).

In 1985, when Air Jordan became available to the public, it took a route not many expected. Buyers started to fray away from using it for Basketball play and started to wear them

leisurely. This was the start of the distinct subculture group known as Sneakerheads. Sneakerheads are individuals who collect, trade and admire sneakers (Matthews, Cryer-Coupet, and Degirmencioglu 2021). Most of the sneakers that they collect are limited in quantity and worn by celebrities (Matthews, Cryer-Coupet, and Degirmencioglu 2021). Sneakerheads are knowledgeable about the history of sneakers and are passionate about the nostalgic factors the sneakers possess (Matthews, Cryer-Coupet, and Degirmencioglu 2021). The characterization of sneakerheads is based on unique behaviors. They include purchasing numerous pairs of sneakers and camping out to purchase newly released sneakers (Choi and Kim 2019). American scholar Albert Cohen argued that "subcultures inverted social norms and values, offer participants a new frame of reference within which to gain status, reputation, and thus psychological well-being (Williams 2011)." Throughout the years, the term, "influencer" has gained more traction, as influencing has turned into a full-time job for Millennials, and Generation Z. Blogs like *Fashionmonitor.com* offer highlights, and up-and-coming sneakerhead influencers that are well known within the community. "From Nike, to Air Jordans, and everything in between, these bloggers and Instagrammers are not shy to express their passion for footwear." This is the type of status and reputation that can come with big-time collectors.

Bourdieu and Black Cultural Capital

Capital is accumulated assets through investment. It is something that over time, you can grow and expand. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that capital can present itself in three fundamental practices (See Figure 1.2). These include, "economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the forms of property rights. Cultural capital, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications. Social capital,

made up of social obligations and connections, which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and maybe institutionalized in the forms of a title of nobility (Bourdieu 1986).” The economy of practices is the historical invention of capitalism (Bourdieu 1986). Since you can look at economic theory and relate it to capitalism, I propose the idea that the Jordan brand, through Nike, went from low economic capital to higher economic capital after the surge in profits by non-Black counterparts. The *2019 Survey of Consumer Finances* showed the long-standing wealth disparities between families in different ethnic and racial groups (Bhutta et al. 2020). On average, the typical white family has eight times the wealth of the typical Black family (Bhutta et al. 2020). White families’ have the highest level of both median and mean family wealth: \$188,000 and \$983,000 (Bhutta et al. 2020). Black families’ median and mean wealth is less than 15 percent that of white families at \$24,000 and \$142,000 (Bhutta et al. 2020) (see figure 1.3 and 1.4).

Tariq Modood, Professor of Sociology, states, “people accumulate similar volumes and types of resources, and invest them in promoting their own and their childrens' life chances. This conception of social class as a likelihood of members' achieving certain socio-economic goals, and the idea of class as life-chances means that the definition of a class system depends not just on the existence of a hierarchy of classes but on the probabilities of movement between classes (Modood 2010). If we look at social capital as closely related to economic theory and capital as I have presented, you could assume that members of both the Black and white communities follow trends of purchases based on the resources they have presented to them. The Jordan 1 sneaker, to date, is still the most inexpensive sneaker on the Jordan line retailing in 2021 at \$115 and in 1985 at \$65. The low cost of the sneaker was and is, so it can be afforded. It was made for and

by the Black community. David L. Andrews, the author of *“Michael Jordan Inc, Corporate Sport, Media Culture, and Late Modern America”* explains it perfectly.

“The black connection to basketball dates back to the turn of the 20th century. The first Black professional basketball team the Harlem Globetrotters emerged in the 1920s. The sport began integration in the 1950s, and teams pulled legendary Black coaches and players, which formed the basis of the coming domination of basketball by Black men. By the end of the 1960s, the majority of the players in the NBA were black. The Jordan sneaker reflects at once the projection and stylization of black urban realities linked in our contemporary historical moment to rap culture and the underground political economy of crack, and reigns as the universal icon for the culture of consumption. The sneaker symbolizes the ingenious manner in which black cultural nuances of cool, hip, and chic have influenced the broader American cultural landscape. It was black street culture that influenced sneaker companies' aggressive invasion of the black juvenile market. This is how "sneaker culture" became associated with young black men, even though young black men are far from the only ones to wear sneakers (Andrews 2001).”

Commodification

Shoes are commonly perceived as mass-produced commodities within hegemonic systems of mass production and consumption (Miner 2019). *Cultural Commodification: where Ethnic Minorities and Development Policies meet* by Lara Hill, explains that “broad development policies targeting impoverished ethnic minorities seek to merge cultural preservation and economic development goals using cultural commodification as a means to improve livelihoods and ways of life. Since culture found its way into development policy, transforming it from a commodity-centered concept to a human-centered one, the diversity of culture itself has risen to the forefront as something in need of protection as a valuable

commodity (Hill 2008). Above, I discussed the connection in which the sneaker subculture has to the Black community. It should be seen as something that should be protected in many instances. The Jordan effect has completely changed Blackness in America. "*The Jordan Effect*" also known as Jordan's impact on the community, has been "humongous and immeasurable (Johnson et al. 1998)." Economists often talked of Jordan as a "positive externality," which is another way of saying he also makes his "teammates" better in the business arena (Johnson et al. 1998). Jordan has paved the way for other Black athletes and members of the community to have a pathway to success in a way that makes African Americans seen. That in itself deserves divine protection. In "*The Jordan Effect*" an article by Roy Johnston, he explains that, "Although Chicago is the league's third-largest market, the Bulls' corporate sponsors generally pay a 20% premium over comparable packages with the New York Knicks or Los Angeles Lakers. What is Jordan's impact on the city of Chicago? The once-dilapidated area around the \$175 million United Center has improved dramatically. The second Michael Jordan Golf Center was constructed in Charlotte, N.C., for \$2.85 million. And the NBA signed a handful of television sponsors for four seasons between the years of 1998-2001 at \$90 million each, well above the \$60 million for the previous four seasons (Johnson et al. 1998)."

Subcultures create stratification systems in the same way dominant cultures do (Muggleton, Hall, and Haenfler, n.d.). The stratification system of subcultures is based on the continuously changing collective values within the group (Muggleton, Hall, and Haenfler, n.d.). For the Black community, the values of the sneaker subculture have always remained the same; "how can this be maintained as accessible to the Black community?" Similar to dominant cultures, subcultures based stratification on cultural capital, symbolic capital, and authenticity. Cultural capital is based on how the individual follows the norms and practices of the subculture,

symbolic capital is how much respect and legitimacy is based on the individual's status in the subculture (Muggleton, Hall, and Haenfler, n.d.). The Black community has always viewed sneaker culture as the same. Where commodification comes in, was largely in part to the rise of Generation Z and Tik Tok.

The Effects of white influencers: Generation Z and Tik Tok

Generation Z (people born between 1997-2015) make up the population of the most popular influencers to date. Social media influencers are people that have established credibility with large social media audiences. Influencers often have a significant influence on their followers' and peer consumers' decisions (Ki and Kim 2019). They can be defined as, "independent third-party endorsers who have developed sizable social networks by sharing details about their personal lives, experiences, and opinions publicly through texts, pictures, and videos (Ki and Kim 2019). Today, the target audience for athleisure products is mostly Millennials and Generation Z consumers who see sneakers as status symbols (Kronston 2016). With that being said, TikTok has a collaborative filtering system (Gassam Asare 2020). What this means is, say you follow Charli D'amelio, the most followed user on TikTok with 114.8 Million followers who also happens to be white; your "For You" page will often mimic the people you follow. So, for white teenagers, they are getting white creators in their recommended lists. This makes the pool for Black content creators to become smaller and smaller among white demographics. A *Forbes* article, states that "If the majority of popular creators on TikTok are white, for example, this can prevent creators of color with smaller followings from being seen and recommended as often on the platform. Visibility is important for creators and can translate to money and opportunities. If creators of color receive less visibility than their white counterparts, this could lead to fewer of these opportunities. Because the platform's most popular

users are white, TikTok’s algorithm may elevate white creators while limiting the visibility and reach of creators of color (Gassam Asare 2020).” So, I argue you are not seeing the Black creators that are Branding the Jordan 1 shoe, but instead you see them worn by white creators, who have a large percent of a white following, which is the trickle-down effect as to why the Jordan 1 sneaker has become commodified by white people between the ages of 16-25. There is no place you can actively find demographics of race and ethnicity concerning tik tok users. The lack of evidence is evident enough that there is a built-in racial bias of the TikTok algorithm. Because fans and followers often see influencers as people that are authentic and trustworthy, they are more prone to buy the products they wear and promote. So, Jordan 1 shoes are rising to higher capital, because of a skyrocket in sales, but the sales are partially attributed to white counterparts.

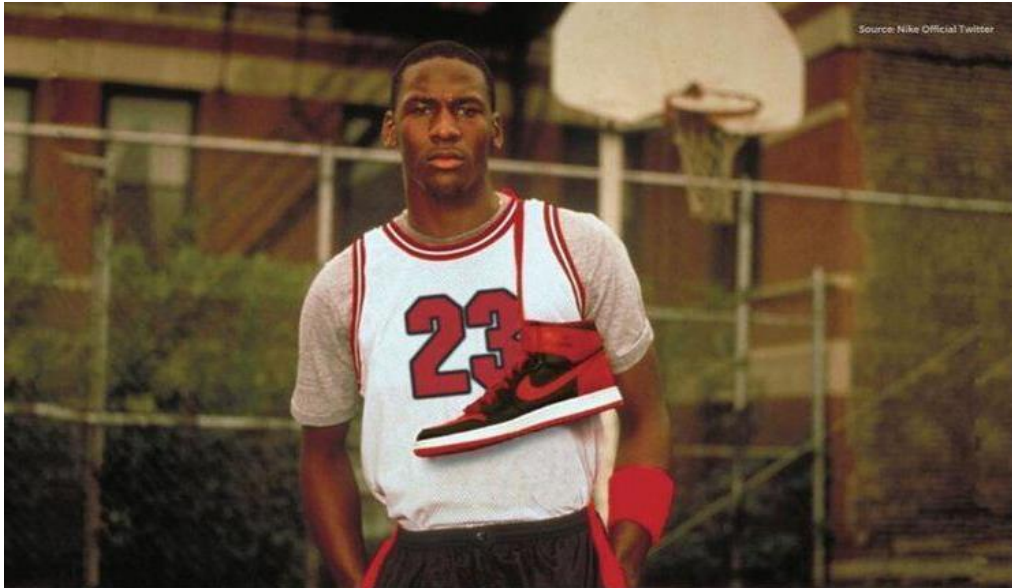
Resellers: Goat, StockX, Flight Club

Over the years, Sneakerheads have had a financial impact within the marketplace given the sale and resell activity within the sneaker community (Matthews, Cryer-Coupet, and Degirmencioglu 2021). Because of this, resell sites, and brands have become more prevalent. We have gotten to this point because the sneaker market has become more mainstream. Sneakers sell out faster from the distributor, which leaves people looking to second and third parties to purchase “deadstock” shoes. A sneaker reseller is simply a person who purchases limited-edition pairs of deadstock sneakers and sells them for a profit to another consumer (Weinhold 2020). When people realized that there was a big market for resales, that's when it turned into a big business. The current worldwide sneaker market sits at an estimated value of approximately \$55 Billion (Lux and Bug 2018). The estimated market of the resell business including sites like Goat, StockX, and Flight Club is about \$1.02 Billion. At this point, some limited edition

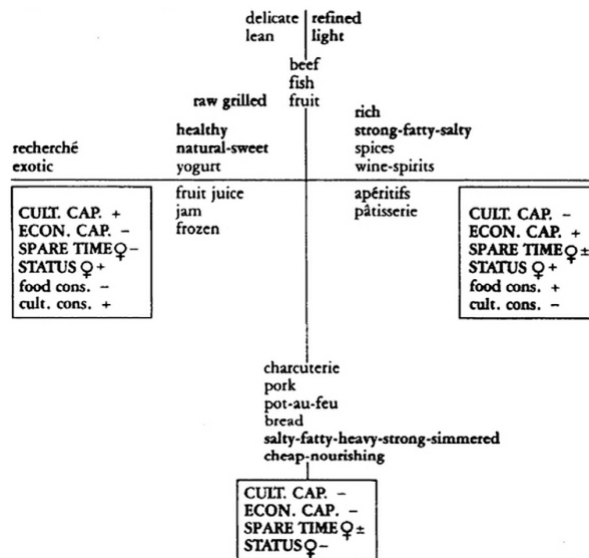
sneakers such as hip hop artist Travis Scott's collab with Jordan can be sold on resale sites for hundreds and, in some cases thousands of dollars more than the original retail price. While sneaker resale sites can be beneficial in some ways, they are also harmful. Sites have enough money to buy the shoes in large quantities, which in turn makes the retail price shoes sell out extremely fast, which automatically means you need to buy them at a resale price. So, the only ones making money are the big resale corporations.

Conclusion

This article analyzes sneaker culture under the lens of commodification and consumption of Black culture in relation to non-Black counterparts. Throughout, I have discussed how sneaker culture has gone from low cultural capital to higher culture capital, specifically the Jordan Brand because of commodification. By using the Bourdieu model of economic capital and cultural capital, I discuss how sneaker culture and the industry has become commodified by white culture capital. Through explanation and argument, I present how something created for and by Black people has now been taken into the hands of whiteness, and has transformed into a capitalist world for economic gain.



(Figure 1.1 Michael Jordan with the First Jordan 1) (source: Nike Official Twitter)



(Figure 1.2 Bourdieu "The Food Space")

Disparities in Wealth by Race and Ethnicity in the 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances, Accessible Data

Figure 1: White families have more wealth than Black, Hispanic, and other or multiple race families in the 2019 SCF.

Median Net Worth (Top panel)

[Make Full Screen](#)

	Networth	Standard Error (+)	Standard Error (-)
White	188.2	193.8	182.6
Black	24.1	28.4	19.8
Hispanic	36.1	40.9	31.3
Other	74.5	83.2	65.8

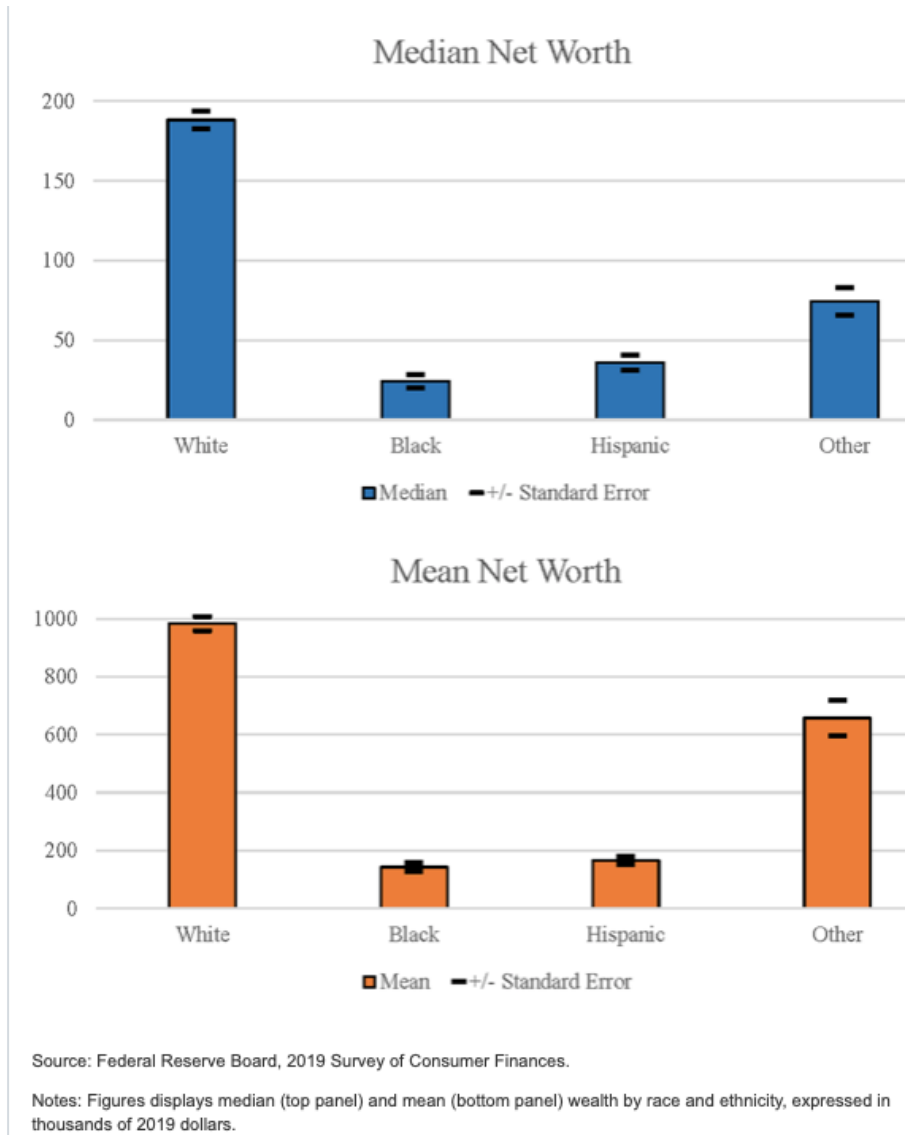
Mean Net Worth (Bottom panel).

[Make Full Screen](#)

	Networth	Standard Error (+)	Standard Error (-)
White	983.4	1008.4	958.4
Black	142.5	158.4	126.6
Hispanic	165.5	178.9	152.1
Other	657.2	718.4	596.0

Source: Federal Reserve Board, 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances.

(Figure 1.3 Federal Reserve Board, 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances)



(Figure 1.4 Pictured Federal Reserve Board, 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances)



pictured above: Charli D'Amelio



(Figure 1.5 pictured above: Emma Chamberlin: 9.9M Tik Tok followers, 12.8M Instagram followers, 10.1M Youtube subscribers, in Jordan 1 sneakers)

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A Brief Analysis of the Influence of Conspiracy Thought on American Politics

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The American conspiracy theory is a time-honored classic form of anti-establishment thought. It's become a rite of passage for young people to learn of jet fuel on steel beams or extraterrestrials caged in Nevada. These theories appear to be a form of contemporary legend, making use of the fact that, within a post-truth framework, little is needed for a claim to be substantiated. Truth claims rooted within conspiracy thought have appeared to drill into modern political discourse, particularly within the alt-right. By understanding and critiquing the nature of conspiracy thought and its link to political claims, it becomes possible to uncouple conspiracy from effective political action, therefore reducing its impact.

Establishing conspiracy theories as a form of contemporary legend is a relatively simple task. Legends are necessarily plausible, historical events that invite debate that deal in the space of real people possibly doing something that would typically be considered uncouth. What matters is that it's possible for someone to believe these theories to be true, not that they are. They require the same amount of evidence as a post on an internet forum: none. Instead, pseudo-logical links between nodes of knowledge act as bridges for believers to take leaps of faith. Karl Popper coined the term conspiracy theory and described it as a “result of the secularisation of religious superstition,” with the gods replaced by “the Learned Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists” (Robertson 2015, 6). Adherents then hold to their legend of choice in the same fashion that someone may believe in their god(s). The mode of knowledge then becomes faith. A blind faith built upon a trust in a mode of knowledge simply because its

contrary to widely accepted conceptions of reality. “The importance of the study of conspiracy theory narratives is that they are a microcosm of broader cultural trends in the interplay of knowledge and power” (Robertson 2015, 12). These contemporary legends act as dowsing rods for this interplay. By focusing on distrust of various elites, whether they be in political office or behind a news desk, modern conspiracy theories act as ways to attack existing truth regimes while simultaneously constructing a truth niche. This niche acts as the center of focus for adherents who exist within it. The conspiracy begins to block out outside information and define its own bounds. The political implications are directly tied to this new form of reality and how it can manifest itself within adherents to this mode of knowledge.

Conspiracy theories are inherently attached to power dynamics. The concept that powerful individuals and groups are actively attempting to achieve some nefarious goal is the basic recipe for a conspiracy (Douglas and Mills 2022). Interestingly enough, this plays into the general American distrust of anything considered to be elitist. The targets of said theories become a cultural other to rally against. Conspiracy theories act as forms of “‘stigmatized knowledge,’ explanations which challenge the epistemic authorities, including knowledge that has been ...suppressed” (Robertson 2015, 7). The proponents of conspiracy thought naturally feel isolated from the wider epistemic tradition and use it as a form of justification. The more the elites claim they are incorrect, the more the conspiracy thinkers hunker down. For every person willing to recognize the tragedy of JFK’s assassination, there is another willing to count figures on a grassy knoll and blame the Cuban mafia. By their nature, the conspiracy theorist refuses alternatives and searches for evidence to support what is an a priori truth (Shermer 2010, 102). The confirmation bias inherent in the collective thought patterns of conspiracists means that they can never be incorrect. A pile of evidence mounting against them is simply an attack from the

elites, targeting them since they came too close to the truth. Because of this, the theorist is effectively living within their own reality, devoid of any connection to a wider mode of knowledge.

When Edgar Maddison Welch drove across state lines headed for Comet Pizza, he went ““with the intent of helping people”” (Kennedy 2017). Welch believed he was singlehandedly going to storm the basement of a satanic cabal working to traffic children for pedophile political elites. In his world, before the police came and he noticed the Comet Pizza had no basement, Welch believed, no, knew, he was a hero. His reality was entrenched in the contemporary legend of Qanon. Any outside observer reading the well documented information on “Q” would effectively see a creepypasta, pulled from an ever-growing internet forum of absurd literature meant for purely disturbed entertainment. Instead, the American far-right clung to a message fueled by a fondness for religious superiority and hatred for the political left.

Just as Robertson establishes a link between conspiracy theory and religion, there is an interesting link between the political and the religious, particularly for the far-right. Gentile explains that, for fascism, politics consumed existence and broke the boundaries between the religious and political (1990, 230-231). If we consider the links between these modes of knowledge and truth creation, it becomes clear that the credibility provided by links between the political, religious, and conspiratorial enables a form of knowledge embedded in the far-right ideology. This form of knowledge acts as a form of spirituality. Spirituality here is a practice where the individual is removed from themselves, and becomes a subject of a form of knowledge, experience, or belief (Foucault and Bremner 2020, 124). The individual becomes the tool of a wider truth regime that acts to separate and contain their identity. The individual can no longer separate themselves from the truth regime. This means that in order for the individual to

reject this mode of knowledge, they must reject themselves. Here, the adherence to a form of conspiracy thought acts as a form of spirituality, linking the religious and political into an identity unable to be questioned from within. Those active within the mindset are actively experiencing the world through a lens of their theories. This essentially creates different realities where elections are rigged despite the lack of evidence, global elites worship Satan, and microchips have been put into the vaccines. While there is no basis in reality for these claims, any links to objective reality are nonissues. Instead, the culture developed around the shared ideological space is necessary for the social criticisms of far-right conspiracy.

What has become interesting is that the contemporary legends that encapsulate conspiracy theories act as direct motivators. The misinformation that drives these new interpretations of reality create real consequences. It drives a family man across state lines to a pizza shop and a host of people to Texas, hoping to meet John F. Kennedy Junior. What's more is that it drives people to larger, dangerous actions. The January sixth insurrection in Washington D.C. was carried out by individuals who believed that their interpretation of reality claimed they were being attacked and denied representation. They moved on political actors, calling for violence and willing to save the nation they believed was being stolen from them. What became more interesting was the conspiracy that sprung from the events of January sixth. Instead of claiming responsibility for the events that occurred, the actual happenings were reduced in size. The insurrection became a simple and peaceful demonstration. To some, the insurrection was the work of Leftist political actors trying to discredit the far-right actors. The non-organization ANTIFA stormed the capitol with American flags, the people climbing the stairs and attacking officers were the members of the ideological in-group. This also highlights the extensive use of doublethink in this conspiracy thought. Not only were the events blown widely out of proportion

in the eyes of the conspiracy supporters, but the events were not even carried out by the true patriots. This once again plays into the confirmation bias inherent in conspiracy thought. The quest for a constructed truth creates a quest for alienation from other structures.

Understanding conspiracy thought as a form of contemporary legend is an interesting undertaking that needs a deeper conceptualization. The fact that conspiracy thought possesses the legitimizing truth power of legend makes it an interesting tool. The connection between the spiritual, religious, and political creates an understanding of the way modern truths are created and understood. To connect these modes of knowledge is to recognize the larger power structures at play and how they influence current political movements. Contemporary legends attached to the identity of the far-right are actively making use of these structures and co-opting their powers to provide themselves political legitimacy and drive political action amongst members acting as subjects of this thought process. Conspiracy thus becomes a tool of direction, a baton in the hands of an orchestral conductor, moving the brass section to the stairs of the Capitol building. America's unique fascination with conspiracy set the groundwork for the modern alt-right. It begins with an existing cultural tradition focused on the distrust of traditional political systems. That tradition then becomes grounded in an experience shared by far-right conspiracy thinkers who believe they are being disenfranchised or their way of life is under attack. The core experience is distrust while a modern tradition grounded in misinformation and bigotry is being formed. By breaking down and examining the way these thought processes are disseminated and created, it becomes possible to critique the structure of the far-right.

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Surf Rock: Its Portrayal of Coastal Life and Influence on Culture

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In the late 1950s and the first half of the 1960s, America was introduced to one of the most well-known subcultures of any coastal region, the surf culture of southern California. For a brief time, this distinct and entirely American phenomenon held the fantasy of endless summer days and permanent vacations across the United States through film, literature, and most popularly, music. This genre of music, known as surf rock, was an amalgamation of influences and ideas that when put together and finally realized in its distinct geographic settings and local culture, created a form of American music which had not really been heard before and that would have impacts long past its era. Surf Rock is a distinct representation of Californian coastal life and culture, containing a deep and multifaceted history in both American art and music, as well as beach and coastal culture.

Regarding its significance and place within the school of American Studies, primarily within folklore. Surf rock, which already has an important position and has made impacts on American life and culture, gains a deeper understanding through American studies and folklore. Since this genre, like most American culture and art, is not only a combination of different genres of American music, but different cultures as well. Due to its position as an aural tradition, place within folklore, or as a prime example of the ethnography of coastal California, beach rock has been cemented as a cultural event and phenomenon which fits directly into the parameters of American Studies, and one finds that it is the perfect lens with which to view and study it further.

Like many genres of music, surf rock is a combination of different genres and influences ranging from the Dixieland jazz of Louis Armstrong to the country twang of Hank Williams and even the traditional pop of Bing Crosby. Not only does it show the influence of these American artists and musical styles but contains influences from the wider world as well. But if one genre were to proclaim its position as the largest and most audible influence on surf music, it would be the rock & roll and rockabilly of the late and mid-1950s, though it too is an amalgamation of styles as most American music is. Without the sounds of artists such as country stalwart Chet Atkins, to Delta blues and Chess records legend Muddy Waters, it's doubtful that guitarists Dick Dale, who is arguably the first person to create a song in the vein of surf rock, would have found the loud, reverb driven guitar tone and distinct style of playing on songs such as 'Miserlou' and 'Let's go Trippin'. In his article *Sonic Turbulence: A thirty-year timeline of LA music*, author Josh Kun wrote of Dick Dale's release "The surf rock craze is born, thanks to "Let's go Trippin," an instrumental by Dick Dale and the Del-Tones"¹. Beach rock would prove to be a sound that became synonymous with the state of California and would be emulated for the next six decades. It's sound was crucially influential to not only other musicians, but writers, film makers, and artists in general ranging from the psychedelic freak-outs of Frank Zappa to Quentin Tarantino's pop culture worshipping films.

As the 1950s passed and the 1960s began, a United States mired in Cold War era paranoia and counterbalanced by rapid social change began to acclimate to this radical new form of music driven almost entirely by young people that was a huge part of a burgeoning youth culture. In high school hallways and college campuses across the country young people were beginning to grow unhappy and dissatisfied with the current state of their country, and the

¹ Kun, "Sonic Turbulence: A Thirty-Year Timeline of LA Music", 72

establishments influence on their lives, they were perfectly positioned to control and influence the cultural and artistic conversation. Rock & roll is a prime example of this youthful frustration, as it and its subgenres, which included surf rock only continued to grow and prosper, which further fueling this cultural unease. California, the home of surf rock, long perceived by the rest of the nation as being a “utopia” since the days of the old west and the dust bowl, was already on the cutting edge of art and culture. Richard Aquila details this idea in his article, *Images of the American West in Rock Music*, writing “by accident or design, the Beach Boys had plugged their music into an image already well established in the American mind. Their song about California echoed the theme of the mythic West as a Garden of Eden”². California, which was already home to the massively influential and financially successful film, television, and music industries, was at the heart of American pop culture, and was primed and ready for the explosion of beach rock.

As previously mentioned, for the first-time young people had a growing and profound influence on culture and a changing position within American society. The youth of California had the advantage of an already firm subculture of their own. Across the entire coast of California, youth and surf culture had fused into something entirely its own with a unique aesthetic and imagery. One of the major aspects of this imagery, which is used heavily in the lyrics of nearly all beach rock, is that of surfing. When one thinks of the music of Jan and Dean or The Beach Boys, the image of tanned young men and women rushing into the waves on a busy beach. Or gathering at bars and diners decorated in beach style and riding around in souped up cars with surf boards sticking out of their back seats comes to mind. This presence of car imagery also ties into the next major theme in the lyrics of beach rock, car culture. Much of the lyrics present in beach rock deals with cars and hot rods, they mention “souped up” cars and drag

² Aquila, “Images of the American West in Rock Music”, 419

racing. This imagery is as much a part of this music as surfing, and eventually the two ideas essentially fused into one entity as part of beach culture. In his thesis, *A Spatial Analysis of Surf Music*, author David F. McCarter, wrote of the topics discussed in the lyrics of typical surf rock songs “The topics often include the beach, surfing, girls, cars, and the ideal early 1960s California teenage lifestyle. Many times, the song titles had a surfing connotation, such as ‘Surfin’ Bird’, ‘Surfer Girl’, ‘Wipe Out’, ‘Surfin’ U.S.A.’, ‘Pipeline’, and ‘I Live for the Sun’”³. This theme of summer, parties, and teenage life in California permeates all of surf music.

As mentioned in a previous section of this essay, Dick Dale is widely considered to be the first artist to achieve the sound of surf or beach rock. But his music was largely instrumental compositions that were based around the electric guitar. While this would continue to be a common thread throughout a lot of surf rock, it did not hint to any of the lyrical tropes which would arrive later. It was not until the early music of Jan & Dean and the Beach Boys that these ideas of ‘Surfing Safaris’ and ‘Endless Summers’ would arrive and feature so much. From each of these groups’ earliest recordings those lyrical themes and ideas were a present and integral part of their music and their genres place in the history of popular music. Another important aspect of surf rock music is the representation of danger and excitement within its lyrics. Author R.L. Rutsky describes this in his paper *Surfing the Other: Ideology on the Beach*, writing “The pursuit of danger and thrills is one of themes of surf music and this is reflected not only in the lyrics of many of the songs but also in the frenetic beat of songs like “Wipeout”, “Surfin’ Bird,” and “Surfin’ Safari.”⁴. These ideas of danger likely tapped into the same desire that brought young people to both the sport of surfing and car culture. It’s undeniable that all these themes

³ McCarter, “A Spatial Analysis of Surf Music”, 3

⁴ Rutsky, “Surfing the Other: Ideology on the Beach”, 18

and imagery attributed to the lighting fast rise in popularity of beach rock, as these themes were hugely popular amongst high-schoolers, college students, and young people, who bought their records and attended their concerts.

Regarding the influence of Surf rock on the rest of American culture, it was profound in that it partly encapsulated the tumultuous cultural shift of the 1960s. While it is obvious that no one person, group, place, or event attributed to what would end up being a pivotal time in modern American history, it is fair to argue that within the dense timeline of important ideas and events within the 1960s, beach/surf rock certainly deserves to be mentioned. In a way, the themes of an endless party and youthful abandon acted as a fitting distraction from the distress of the Cold War and civil rights unrest of the beginning half of the 1960s. Part of the sudden decline of surf rock's popularity is most assuredly that its primary audience had outgrown a genre which dealt almost entirely with youth and adolescence. This audience had grown up and sought out different things in art and music, especially in the upheaval of the 1960s. As the decade wore on and grew more intense, with the cloud of the Vietnam War hanging over the nations collective head, and the general sense of chaos associated with the latter half of the decade, summer nights and beach parties were a less attractive, and less practical prospect in music and entertainment.

Something else which may have contributed to this sudden decrease in popularity was that surf rock was almost entirely marketed to and popular with a teenage white audience. Due to this, surf rock seemed largely closed and exclusive to outside groups or people of other races or ethnicities. This perspective is examined by John J. Bukowczyk in *California Dreamin'*, *Whiteness, and the American Dream*, in which he writes

“Surf music and the beach bands that played it, together with the California, surfing, and corporate promoters, enshrined the image that, in large measure, has defined Southern California in the popular imagination, a freewheeling paradise of young, golden-bronzed bodies with sun-bleached blonde manes, a place where whiteness was taken for granted”⁵

Considering this, it makes sense that as issues and questions about the inclusivity of both culture and society rose in the 60s, an art form which was almost blatantly geared toward one specific group would experience a decline. In fact, beach rock was at its most popular between 1960 and 1965, coinciding with the growth of the civil rights movement, and that as society became more integrated surf rock's exclusive nature became more apparent.

Another aspect of its influence may have been that it contributed to the liberalization of American life and culture, primarily the loosening of a stifling moral system that was present in the 1950s and early 1960s. This is a surprising result since much of the surf rock music and many surf films had a preoccupation with portraying a largely wholesome image, as they wanted to cast a wide net to as many teenagers and young people as possible, ensuring that they bought records and concert tickets. Yet still when surf rock's popularity, and the popularity of the surf craze in general, began to decline, surfing once again became something somewhat negative, mainly associated with outsiders with its own subculture. In *Surfing Films and Videos: Adolescent Fun, Alternative Lifestyle, Adventure Industry*, author Douglas Booth writes “Surfers became both subversives and outlaws, and the social distance between surfers and the mainstream public widened, the market for films about carefree, fun-filled days at the beach

⁵ Bukowczyk, “California Dreamin’, Whiteness, and the American Dream”, 92

vanished”⁶. While this quote talks about films, it would not be a stretch of the imagination to picture the same shift happening to surf music as well. Surf rock and surfing seemed to become part of the counterculture, which had become a large and integral part of American culture during the latter half of the 1960s.

American Folklore is the perfect academic area to study Surf rock in. Since Folklore encompasses both history and culture, the places in which they intersect, along with the influence that intersection may have had on the world. Surf rock fits into this idea within folklore in multiple ways. One of which is that it is an amalgamation of music styles, cultures, and peoples, all of which are American or at the very least began to blend in America. It also fits as an aspect of American culture in that it is implanted into the minds of most people as something tied to a certain era, the latter half of the 50s and the former half of the 60s, and to a certain area, that being the coast of California. It’s also a form of folklore, author Stephen D. Winick describes in Chapter 24 of *A Companion to Folklore*, aptly titled *Folklore And/ In Music*, “In the world of folklore scholarship, folk music has always had a prominent place. Ballads and songs were among the first to be systematically collected, and they helped theorists to conceptualize folk culture”⁷. Specifically, it contributes to aural tradition and storytelling as all music does. With lyrics detailing life for surfers, beachgoers, and young people in this era. As previously mentioned, it’s also something which is tied into many people’s perception of America at that time, practically to the point that it would now be considered a form of Americana and is tied into how we perceive ourselves and our culture.

⁶ Booth, “Surfing Films and Videos: Adolescent Fun, Alternative Lifestyle, Adventure Industry”, 316

⁷ Winick, “Folklore And/In Music”, 466

Winick further expands on this idea of beach rock's place in American Folklore by discussing 'Miserlou', Dick Dale's watershed beach rock track. By dissecting the song's Greek, Jewish, and middle eastern origins which includes Dale's own Lebanese roots, influenced his interpretation of the song. we can see how this one song reflects the traditions of multiple regions, cultures, and groups of people. Interestingly, each of the cultures which influenced the song or had a hand in its origins claim some or all the credit for the song's creation. Winick writes of the song "The melody of "Miserlou" was being used for belly-dancing among Lebanese Americans in Boston during Dick Dale's youth, and by an Orthodox Jewish Rabbi in New York in 1951. This would suggest to most folklorists that a Greek origin for the melody is far from a certainty"⁸. This idea reflects that folklore can be influenced by multiple factors and ideas, and how some these things can blend and create something entirely new and different. This is present in a lot of American Folklore beyond music, such as art and literature.

Surf rock, and essentially music in general can be seen as one of the strongest examples of oral tradition and folklore as well as recording history in an oral way. Surf rock serves as a document of certain period in recent American History but is also an example of Californian and coastal subculture. It's not only a representation of Californian coastal subculture, but due to its widespread popularity and influence, all of American pop culture. It's also interesting in that it is proof that aural history and tradition still carry on today even though we live in a society in which nearly all information is documented physically whether on paper or digitally. Specifically in the realms of art and music. Winick once again states this best in his conclusion to *Folklore And/ In Music*, writing "Although the advent of media technologies, from file-sharing to Facebook, has blurred the boundaries of "oral transmission," there will always be traditional folk

⁸ Winick, "Folklore And/In Music", 475

music undergoing the process of communal re-creation. There will always be small-group gatherings where music is performed and shared”⁹.

. Surf Rock is a distinct representation of American, specifically Californian coastal life and culture and it has a deep and multifaceted history in both music and beach culture and a large influence on American culture itself. Surf rocks legacy can be seen on two primary fronts, its effect on our collective cultural memory of the 1950s and 1960s, and its influence on our perception of coastal life and culture, specifically that of coastal life in southern California. When examining surf rock as a phenomenon through the academic lens of American studies, with a primary focus on folklore we can see much about the confluence of cultures and groups of people in the United States, as well as the importance of geographic location and the effect that specific location has on people who live there. Surf rock is something that will continue to be one of the most fascinating and culturally relevant aspects of coastal life, worthy of both cultural attention and academic study.

⁹ Winick, “Folklore And/In Music”, 479-80

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Articulating an American Art Form: A Transnational Study of Abstract Expressionism

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INTRODUCTION

“It seems to be assumed that since America has not yet produced anything very important in the way of art, there is little likelihood that it ever will,” art critic Clement Greenberg assessed in 1950 (Greenberg 1950). While America had long been considered a cultural backwater compared to Europe, following the Second World War a movement of loosely associated abstract painters gained prominence on the world stage, with critics like Greenberg eventually declaring that New York, instead of Paris, had become the new center of the art world. With this heightened attention on American art, Americans became increasingly concerned about the reputation of their country abroad, with the spotlight shining brightly on the new global superpower. As a movement, Abstract Expressionism was the perfect target for those wishing to project certain values. The artists were generally politically neutral, the absence of recognizable figures and objects lent itself to a wide variety of interpretations, and it was perceived to be a totally American style, free from influence from abroad. Accordingly, government officials began organizing exhibitions explicitly aimed at foreign audiences to display American art. While the new art was abstract, gestural, and to many incomprehensible or even offensive, it was useful because it could be said to display one key value of importance to America: freedom.

The general public, art critics, museum curators, and politicians on both sides of the aisle created their own narratives using the art as illustrations. Understanding the way in which these various actors made meaning of Abstract Expressionism reveals the larger relationship between

America and its art, which is ultimately one that values the artwork as a vehicle for nationalistic meaning, rather than valuing the artist and the art for its own sake.

This paper will focus on a few key moments in the history of American modern art to illustrate this thesis. First, Part I will focus on a 1946 show titled *Advancing American Art* as a case study to understand the relationship between the public, government, and cultural institutions and American art, specifically the concern about which values art communicated to the rest of the world. Then, with the *Advancing American Art* show setting a backdrop, in Part II Abstract Expressionism as a movement will be analyzed as a transnational phenomenon, first tracing its influences, which prove to be more international than American. Here the voices of the art critic and artists themselves provide key insight. Then, in Part III this paper examines the impact of the movement on the world, which was facilitated by American political operatives in conjunction with museum leaders as a weapon of the Cultural Cold War. Finally, Part IV concludes with a closer look at American artists and their personal relationship to America.

While previous scholarship has focused on Abstract Expressionism either through a solely political, cultural, or art historical lense, this paper synthesizes these approaches to specifically focus on the transnational character of the movement as a method to examine American culture. Ultimately, this paper challenges the dominant narrative about Abstract Expressionism that positions it as a solely American movement, instead exposing its transnational character, ultimately revealing very American qualities in all their contradictory complexities.

Part I: *Advancing American Art* and Hysteria over Modernism

In 1946, the American State Department organized an exhibition titled *Advancing American Art*. The State Department purchased seventy-nine oil paintings with the intention of sending them abroad, to expose the world to new, modern American art. There was only one issue:

Americans themselves were outraged and offended by the work, causing the show to be cancelled and the works all sold off, despite receiving positive responses abroad. Examining the response to *Advancing American Art* shows the provocative nature of modern art in contemporary cultural discourse, and an American preoccupation with the country's perception abroad.

By 1946, the United States had reached prominence in the art world. Emerging from World War II with more political, economic, and military than ever before, culture became the next front upon which to assert dominance. As Serge Guilbaut points out, by 1945 the American middle class had grown wealthier, and the lack of art being exported from Europe due to the devastation of the war led to a greater demand for art than ever before in American culture (Guilbaut 1983, 92-4). But while Americans were paying more attention to art, their taste remained quite conservative. The nostalgic, figurative style of social realism used by artists like Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton (fig. 1 & fig. 2) was still favored for its sentimentality and perceived patriotism; the taste for this type of art was nurtured by the prevalence of federal art programs in the thirties (Littleton and Sykes 1999, 44). Curated by J. Leory Davidson, the director of the newly created Office of Information and Cultural Affairs (OIC) in the State Department, the *Advancing American Art* exhibition was not fully comprised of completely avant-garde art; it was devoid of Abstract Expressionism, which at the time was still a burgeoning movement. Davidson selected works by relatively established artists, like Georgia O'Keefe, Stuart Davis, and Ben Shahn. The lack of social realism, however, caused many Americans to believe that the exhibition was not American enough (Littleton and Sykes 1999, 27).

Advancing American Art's provocation over what constitutes an "American" art is central to this discussion. The preference of social realism over the more avant-garde at this time shows not only a conservatism of taste, but a view of art that sees it as valuable as a tool for conveying

patriotic messages. Articles in the *New York Journal-American* harshly ridiculed the paintings in the exhibition after they were initially shown in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, printing captions under reproductions like: “Lunatic’s Delight,” “a picture a somewhat backward four-year old might turn out to illustrate a nightmare,” and “if you contemplate adding to the suicide rate, we recommend this picture for the guest room” (Littleton and Sykes 1999, 27). For the first time in American history, an art exhibition had become a national talking point. As Taylor Littleton and Maltby Sykes conclude, the ultimate reason the show failed was because it did not live up to the task of representing America the way Americans thought it should (Littleton and Sykes 1999, 27).

Congress got involved, as well. With a Republican majority prior to an election year, the House Appropriations Committee began with reviewing the State Department’s budget proposals, which quickly turned into an investigation into the *Advancing American Art* show. Congressmen probed William Benton, a State official, to explain the meaning of several paintings. Congressman Fred Busbey connected the unnatural skin tones and unhappy facial expressions in the paintings as “what the Communists and other extremists want to portray. They want to tell the foreigners that the American people are despondent, broken down, or of hideous shape, thoroughly dissatisfied with their lot and eager for a change of government” (Henning 1947). It is striking that formal aesthetic qualities of modern painting were being debated in such a politically charged atmosphere, given the same importance as methods of governance. Benton himself defended the intention of the show to positively display America’s modern art, while privately admitting that it was handled poorly, namely the responsibility of one person to select every painting for such a significant show (Littleton and Sykes 1999, 36). Ironically, the show was so successful abroad that the Russians had been prompted to start organizing their own show in retaliation- just as *Advancing American Art* was being cancelled (Littleton and Sykes 1999, 33).

Artists, critics, and those considered to be a part of the high-culture world of fine art of course had different opinions. The director of the Art Institute of Chicago, Daniel Rich, in light of the public controversy surrounding the exhibition, cautioned “at this juncture an effort to understand what our artists are attempting to do might be more rewarding than displays of hostility, name-calling, indifference, or conspiratorial witch-hunting” (F.G. 1948). Rich goes on to describe how artists are often misunderstood prophets of their time, while also stressing that they are Americans working in a new American art form. Interesting here is his use of the phrase “our artists,” and insistence on stressing that their national identity is key to the understanding and acceptance of their art. The curator was sensitive to attacks on modern art, including the backlash against *Advancing American Art*, as well as attacks by Congress and President Truman himself, who famously referred to modern art as “merely the vaporings of half-baked lazy people” in a letter to Benton. (Henning 1947). In the same letter Truman even gives his own aesthetic judgement of art: “There are a great many American artists who still believe that the ability to make things look as they are is the first requisite of a great artist.” Not was the subject matter important when advancing American ideas, but so too was the style.

By analyzing the responses of various groups to the *Advancing American Art* show, a picture develops of the competing views about the value and role of art in American society immediately following World War II. While it enjoyed positive responses abroad, the negative response from the American public and debate over what type of art adequately communicates American values caused the show to be cancelled. As art critics urged for a more measured consideration of art and artists, public officials also openly ridiculed modern art for not showing American values in a readily understandable form. According to Frances Stonor Saunders, the discomfort with experimental and abstract art articulated by Truman is representative of a broader

feeling by Americans that this art is degenerate, dangerous, and subversive (Saunders 1999, 252). This view, as will be shown later, only intensifies with the rise of the Cold War in the 50's and 60's, where abstract art continues to be simultaneously used as propaganda to exemplify American democracy and regarded as a threat conveying potentially communistic values.

Part II: The New Center of the Art World: New York's International Influences

While the 1947 debacle over *Advancing American Art* reveals the general American feeling about modern art, it still did not include the most advanced form of art at the time, which is variously referred to as Abstract Expressionism or the New York School. While Abstract Expressionism is hailed in art history as a uniquely American movement, closer examination reveals that this school of painting has strong European roots, making it difficult to label it as truly American. The art world writ large transcends geographic boundaries and national interest and is by nature a transnational phenomenon.

In 1948, prominent art critic Clement Greenberg surveyed the American art scene and made a bold declaration: "The conclusion forces itself, much to our own surprise, that the main premises of Western Art have at last migrated to the United States, alone with the center of gravity of industrial production and political power" (Greenberg 1948, 366-9). Greenberg's explanation that the conclusion "forces itself" interestingly removes from the claim his agency as a critic to instead make it seem like this conclusion is natural, evident, and objectively true.

In a later essay titled "American-Type Painting," Greenberg spends most of his time discussing the international influences of the movement. He explains how these new artists had studied European masters like Picasso and Kandinsky, and how the exodus of artists from Europe in World War II created a rich environment in New York City to inspire and uplift American artists. Greenberg also singles out two artists as the most promising new American painters,

without fully explaining that these two artists were immigrants themselves. Arshile Gorky, whom Greenberg praises as “one of the greatest artists we have had in this country,” was a refugee from the Armenian genocide, and Willem de Kooning, praised by Greenberg for his artistic skill, was an immigrant from the Netherlands who traveled to the United States as a stowaway on a ship in 1926 without speaking a word of English. (Greenberg 1955) (Waldman 1981). While Greenberg is quick to point out their international influences- Gorky was a student of the surrealists, and de Kooning the cubists, he leaves out mentioning their personal histories. Artists like Gorky and de Kooning, as well as Mark Rothko (born Markus Rothkowitz) and John Graham (born Ivan Dabrowsky) were all immigrants, bringing with them unique backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives that help form a more complex American identity. This omission erases another crucial aspect of the transnational nature of Abstract Expressionism.

Also given credit for fostering the rise of the moment was Hans Hoffman, an influential teacher who instructed many of the abstract artists in New York. Hoffman was also an immigrant from Germany, where he had established a school in Munich working in the same tradition of European masters like Cezanne and Kandinsky. As Dore Aston explained, “Hoffman’s approach was consistently esthetic-- he maintained the professional European’s confidence in the autonomous character of his art” (Ashton 1972, 79). Ashton also notes that Clement Greenberg also underwent crucial development as a critic by attending Hoffman’s classes (Ashton 1972, 80).

In the attempt to forge a new American artistic identity that seemed more independent from Europe a poster child arose for unbridled freedom in painting as representative of the American west: Jackson Pollock. Pollock’s rising star seemed to represent everything America was in contrast to Europe: rugged, wild, and free. From Cody, Wyoming, Pollock took on the myth of the American cowboy, and his free, gestural drip paintings that changed the art world forever were

seen as American freedom on canvas. Often photographed painting in his very physical style with a cigarette dangling from his mouth (fig. 3), the persona of Jackson Pollock gave the public a specific figure to focus on as a prime example of an American artist. As another artist Budd Hopkins put it: “He was the great American painter, if you conceive of such a person, first of all, he had to be Real American, not a transplanted European. And he should have the big macho American virtues- he should be rough-and-tumble American- taciturn, ideally- and if he is a cowboy, so much the better” (Saunders 1999, 254).¹ Hopkins’ emphasis on a “real” American artist not being a “transplanted European” hints at a certain discomfort with artists like Gorky, de Kooning, and Hoffman and their ability to truly be seen as American artists.

Barnett Newman, a painter and art theorist, also wrote extensively on the influence of European art in New York at this time. Newman, like Greenberg, points to the various European influences. “What the European artist did in this country was to carry... the American artist with him into the museums and other high places where he had [previously] been shunned” he wrote in 1947 (Newman 1990, 161). According to Newman, Greenberg, and Ashton without the influence of European art, and even the physical presence of European artists in New York, this new movement never would have come to fruition.

It should also be noted that this narrative of the world unequivocally accepting New York as the new art capital is itself a narrative developed and perpetuated to underscore American exceptionalism. Recent studies have examined the response of Europeans, particularly those in Paris, to the claim of New York’s dominance in the art world and have shown that that conclusion was not shared by everyone. David Galenson’s 2002 paper shows that instead of accepting

¹ For more on the myth of Jackson Pollock in American culture, see Dennis Raverty, “The Needs of Postwar America and the Origins of the Jackson Pollock Myth,” *Midwest Quarterly: A Journal of Contemporary Thought* 43 no. 3 (2002): 337–45.

American art as supreme, following World War II Parisians still saw themselves as artistic equals and shared the same aesthetic sensibilities as the Americans. They believed they were participating in a more international movement rather than being led by American artists (Galenson 2002, 141-53). Gay MacDonald, as well, illustrates the way that director of Musee National de Art Moderne played an active role in collaborating with the Museum of Modern Art to bring American art to French audiences, maintaining its role as an important purveyor of taste rather than a complicit victim of American influence. (McDonald 1999, 40-61). Michael Plante has also argued that the boundaries between “New York” and “Paris” were quite thin, and that the two art centers had a more dynamic and reciprocal relationship than previous studies have shown. (Plante 1992) These accounts remind us again to question the myth of American exceptionalism created around Abstract Expressionism.

Given these international influences, there were a few environmental factors unique to the United States that did help foster the movement. In “American-Type Painting,” Greenberg attributes the Works Progress Administration (WPA) with providing American artists a chance to work freely without financial anxiety. The WPA allowed artists to be seen as crucial members of society contributing valuable work. The director of the WPA’s program for painters explained: “the receipt of a check from the United States government meant much more than the amount to which it was drawn. It brought to the artist for the first time in America the realization that he was not a solitary worker” (Ashton 1972). The program also gave artists a sense of community; almost all of the first-generation Abstract Expressionists had worked on WPA projects in the thirties. Controversy over the program and constant budget cuts pulled the artists together even more. As Ashton explains, “the burgeoning community of artists was thrown together for self-defense, if for nothing else (Ashton 1972, 46-9).

The United States' role in the war also helped foster a burgeoning American art scene. Following the war, instead of being destroyed physically and financially, the United States emerged with an economic boom and consumers ready to invest in luxury items, with paintings being a prime new investment. For the first time the growing middle class began to invest in art, also breaking down the traditional aristocratic structure of wealthy art patrons commissioning works. This, paired with the lack of art being exported from Europe, created a demand for American painting like there had never been before (Guilbaut 1983, 90-1). A 1944 Artnews article illustrates the new type of art lover: "The new collector almost always buys American. American paintings are cheaper, they are more plentiful, it is easier to find good ones, it is considered "patriotic" to help by supporting American artists" (Louchheim 1944) (Guilbaut 1983, 92-3). Noticeably, nothing in this quote discusses art in terms of its style or expression, but only as a commodity. The word "painting" could just as easily be substituted for "cars" or "televisions." It may be fairly said in terms of style, inspiration, and artistic influence, Abstract Expressionism got the strongest push from European sources, whereas the uniquely American ingredient had more to do with economic opportunity, first with the WPA and then with the postwar economic boom creating a market demand for paintings as consumer goods. This section has also shown the debate over what defines an "American" artist, and the tension between artists and critics over which qualities make an artist most qualified to represent America through their work.

Part III: MoMA, the CIA and the Cultural Cold War

The growing success of Abstract Expressionism seemed to prove to many that the art world was just one more area where America had emerged from the war as a leader, along with political power, military might, and industrial capacity. It quickly became clear that this art had a powerful

communicative ability, and this fact was not lost upon state officials who were tasked with winning over hearts and minds for the American cause abroad.

The way that abstract art was able to proliferate Western values can be explained by one word: freedom. While years prior Americans favored social realism as an American style, as the Cold War began to settle in, paintings like Pollock's stood out as diametrically opposed to Russian painting, which was still being done in a social realist style. The comparison is easy to make when looking at Pollock's *Number 10 (Lavender Mist)* (fig.4) compared to Russian painter Yuri Neprintsev's *Rest After Battle* (fig. 5). Frances Stonor Saunders quotes a former CIA agent involved in the support of modern art: "We recognized that this was the kind of art that did not have anything to do with the socialist realism, and made socialist realism look even more stylized and more rigid and confined than it was. Moscow in those days was very vicious in its denunciation of any kind of non-conformity to its own very rigid patterns. So one could quite adequately and accurately reason that anything they criticized that much was worth support one way or another" (Saunders 1999, 260.) As one may recall, only a few years prior Americans had been outraged by the lack of "American" social realism in the *Advancing American Art* show. Now, that was precisely the style to fight against.

This distinction between the freedom of American painting compared to the stifling style of painting abroad was consciously created and proliferated by the United States government, which saw art as another front of the Cold War. Following the public outrage about the State Department's handling of the *Advancing American Art* show, a new agency began handling and organizing shows of American art sent abroad: the CIA. Knowing that countries abroad still saw America as a cultural backwater, which seemed to be confirmed by the domestic distaste for modern art, higher-level operatives found a way to advance the idea of American modern art

without domestic opposition by doing so through secretive channels. Put more succinctly by Tom Braden, the man who put together the CIA's cultural cold war apparatus: "in order to encourage openness it had to be a secret" (Saunders 1999, 257).

In a report for the State Department surveying the success of American propaganda abroad, the author reveals several key facets about the government's aims. He explains that because there are so many different people, cultures, and points of view in America, the best way to produce clear and effective propaganda is to "select a few key truths" and to move these truths from "paper to mind with the force and frequency to make them stick," meaning that propaganda was selectively chosen to represent a particular view of America that was favorable. The author also makes it very clear their entire cultural propaganda program was aligned towards the singular goal of winning the Cold War (Replier n.d.).

This same report mentioned the Museum of Modern Art as a key player in the implementation of cultural propaganda. According to the author, the majority of work done to shape the perception abroad about America is done by informal and private institutions, like American movies and American tourists. He then suggests ways to influence these groups, perhaps by giving American travelers a "tactful booklet" with their passports. (Replier, n.d.). This thought process shows the way that state professionals thought deeply about propaganda and how to leverage every possible means of communication, making institutions like MoMA that were both private and had growing influence on the art world, all the more useful.

The Museum of Modern Art, was, in fact, the biggest player in the CIA's fight to advance American art. While not explicitly an arm of the CIA, as Saunders points out, many members of the museum's boards, committees, and councils had ties to the Agency (Saunders 1999, 260-3). Eva Cockcroft, in her groundbreaking article "Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War"

puts it more explicitly: “In terms of cultural propaganda, the functions of both the CIA cultural apparatus and MoMA’s international programs were similar, and, in fact, mutually supportive” (Cockroft 1972, 39-41). An example of this connection can be seen in the exhibition catalogue for an MoMA exhibition titled “New American Painting,” which was composed of Abstract Expressionist paintings to be shown around the world. The introduction to the catalogue, written by the museum’s director Alfred H. Barr, aligns the stylistic qualities of the paintings with political philosophy: “their paintings have been praised and condemned as symbolic demonstrations of freedom in a world in which freedom connotes a political attitude” (Barr 1959, 9-13).

He also conveniently explains away the left-leaning politics of the many of the artists: “Most of the artists who during the decade of the Great Depression had been naively attracted by Communism had grown disillusioned both with the machinations of the party and with Socialist Realism.” With these two sentences, Barr tactfully aligns the style of Abstract Expressionism with a freedom concurrent to the values of capitalist democracy rather than the communism of the Soviet Union, even when no such political message was clear in the work itself (Barr 1959, 9-13).

The *New American Paintings* show was organized by MoMA’s International Program, which organized exhibitions of American work to be sent abroad. Cockroft’s conclusion that the activities of both the CIA and MoMA were “mutually beneficial” more accurately describes the complex web of interests that Abstract Expression was caught up in. While the Museum of Modern Art may not have been politically motivated to send out American artworks to combat communism, they did have an interest in promoting the positive perception of American art abroad, which is a goal that the CIA also shared. The most crucial conclusion here is that the artwork itself was used not just to advance art in a strictly formal way, but as a prop to communicate ideas about

American culture. The American public, politicians, and leaders of cultural institutions all believed that art did not just reveal truths about American art, but about America itself.

Crucially, this propaganda is only successful if it is not seen as such. In a speech for the 25th anniversary of the Museum of Modern Art, President Eisenhower declared “When artists are made the slaves and the tools of the state; when artists become chief propagandists of a cause, progress is arrested and creation and genius are destroyed.” Here lies the inherent contradiction of the use of Abstract Expressionist art by the United States government: it is useful as propaganda precisely because of the perception that it is not propaganda. The paintings by the New York School artists represent freedom from state control- but require state action in order to reframe and proliferate them throughout the world to show the world how free America is.

Part IV: Land of the Free? McCarthyism and Artist Perspectives

While members of elite cultural institutions and intelligence agencies saw the potential of Abstract Expressionism to positively represent America abroad, not all Americans had jumped on the modernist bandwagon. The Cultural Cold War demanded a hefty cultural propaganda program from the United States government, but it also allowed for the rise of McCarthyism and a general suspicion of artists in the 60’s and 70’s. One of the most famous detractors of modern art was Republican Congressman Dondero from Michigan. “All modern art is Communistic,” he declared (Saunders 1999, 253). Dondero went on to list his own diagnoses of modern art:

Cubism aims to destroy by designed disorder.

Futurism aims to destroy by the machine myth . . .

Dadaism aims to destroy by ridicule.

Expressionism aims to destroy by aping the primitive and insane.

Abstractionism aims to destroy by the creation of brainstorm . . .

Surrealism aims to destroy by the denial of reason. . . .

For Dondero, the stakes were quite literally life and death: “Communist art, aided and abetted by misguided Americans, is stabbing our glorious American art in the back with murderous intent” (Dondero 1949).

Due to some artists’ former left-leaning political affiliations, in the midst of McCarthyism several artists were put on watch lists. David Craven’s research reveals the extent to which advanced artists were surveilled by the CIA, also creating an atmosphere that seems far from Eisenhower’s declaration of the importance of artistic freedom from the state (Craven 1999, 89-91).

Not surprisingly, artists were well aware of this culture of suspicion and outright hostility. It is important to remember, also, that this was not limited to the years of McCarthyism and a similar reaction to avant-garde art can be seen in the reactions from the *Advancing American Art* show in 1947. As Clem Greenberg reflected in 1955, “The situation [in America] still opposes itself to the individual artist with an unfriendliness that makes art life in Paris or even London idyllic by comparison. [...] The American artist has to embrace and content himself, almost, with isolation, if he is to give the most honesty, seriousness, and ambition to his work. Isolation is, so to speak, the natural condition of high art in America” (Greenberg 1948).

While arguments raged in Congress and within the elite circles of the Museum of Modern Art and CIA over what defined American art, artists were concerned with this question themselves. Being caught in the crossfire of politics did not make this search for American identity any easier. While they resisted being put into a box, in their own ways they also argued for the unique American-ness of their work.

In 1943, an exhibition was organized by the American Modern Artists protesting a show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art of contemporary art that failed to include any of the more advanced work being done by American artists. Similar to the *Advancing American Art* show, it exhibited more figurative and social realist styles and excluded more abstract paintings. In the forward for the catalogue, Barnett Newman diagnosed the cultural climate of art in America: “This exhibition is a first step to free the artist from the stifling control of an outmoded politics. For art in America is still the plaything of politicians. Isolationist art still dominates the American Scene. Regionalism still holds the reins of America’s artistic future” (Newman 1990, 29). Here, by comparing the newer modern art with “isolationist art,” Newman is pointing to the more international character of modern art. Interestingly, he goes on to call for a new culture for America, and that “America has the opportunity of becoming the art center of the world.” (Newman 1990, 29). At the same time that he denigrates the use of art by politicians for nationalistic purposes, he also aims to claim this new art as American. In his essay Newman reveals a desire by artists not only to be seen as producing good art, but producing good *American art*.

Jackson Pollock, who was hailed as cowboy-hero poster boy for the new wild American painting style also disregarded the notion of an independent and exceptional American art form: “The idea of an isolated American painting, popular in this country during the thirties, seems absurd to me, just as the idea of creating a purely American mathematics of physics would seem absurd... The basic problems of contemporary painting are independent of any one country” (Pollock 1944) (Guilbaut 1999, 242). Yet, Pollock did perpetuate his own myth, playing into the vision of the rugged cowboy loner, answering in an interview: “I have a definite feeling for the West: the vast horizontality of the land, for instance” (Pollock 1944) (Raverty 2002, 340). As Serge Guilbaut points out, several of these artists rejected regionalism in favor of internationalism, yet

paradoxically in order to distinguish themselves from tradition they had to emphasize the unique American quality of their work (Guilbaut 1999, 175).

Artists, for their part, were well aware of this contradiction, and many of them left America for this very reason. Joan Mitchell, an abstract painter working in the same circle as Pollock and Newman, spent most of her career in France. In a review from 1965, author and poet John Ashbery specifically noted the impact of this distance on her work, referencing the lack of interference by collectors, dealers, and the built-up art world in New York that became so overwhelming it pushed Americans away (Ashberry 1965): Mitchell was a part of a wave of American artists in Paris known often referred to as a “second occupation.” Her and another of her expatriate peers, Sam Francis, have both been studied by Michael Plante because of their hybrid identity as both French and American. While working in French circles they were seen as more American than the standard French artist, yet more French than the standard American artist. Yet, their art is known to history as examples of American, not French, modern art (Plante 2004).

Other artists left America for specifically political reasons, such as Al Held and Ralph Coburn. Plante quotes Held: “Then at that time, this must have been 1950, the Joe McCarthy and the whole thing about the Rosenbergs was happening and the Rosenbergs lived just about a block away from me down the street there. So there was really a lot of uptight feeling like fascism has arrived. So I decided I was going to get out of the country... it didn’t make any difference where I went, I wanted to go. So, I just said “What about Paris?” ... I stayed there for three years” (Plante 2004). Here arises yet another paradox: while modern art was used as propaganda to show how free America was, the very artists themselves had to escape America in order to find sufficient freedom to work.

Conclusion

Today, there is still a widespread skepticism of abstract art in American culture. A large portion of Americans still see Jackson Pollock with wary eyes, thinking that they, or even their child, could produce the same work of art. This combined with the fact that Pollock paintings regularly sell for over twenty million dollars, creates a suspicion that is not too far removed from Americans' reactions to the *Advancing American Art* show in 1947.

The relationship between Abstract Expressionism and its identity as American has long been slippery and paradoxical. Trying to locate the “American-ness” of this movement reveals several paradoxes that provide insight into American culture. The *Advancing American Art* show in 1947 brought modern art into public consciousness for the first time, where it was mocked and ridiculed, largely because people believed a government-sponsored show should advertise and express positive, tangible, and comprehensible American values. Accustomed to social realism, the public and their government representatives alike rejected art without any easily discernible meaning. As Abstract Expressionism grew in popularity, it gained an identity as the first truly great American artistic style. With critics like Clement Greenberg declaring that America had taken the torch from Paris as the new art capital, this traditional art historical narrative ignores the transnational influences and artists that created the movement. As America entered the Cold War, this art then became another weapon employed by the American government to display evidence of artistic freedom at home, while the very same art was simultaneously being degraded on the floors of the House of Representatives. This whole time American artists are themselves trying to define their own national identity with relation to their art, with many of them ultimately leaving the country in order to find true artistic freedom. As artist Al Frankfurter eloquently summed up:

Only a great, generous, muddling democracy like ours could afford the simultaneous paradox of a congressman who tries to attack Communism by

demanding the very rules which Communists enforce wherever they are in power, and a handful of artists who enroll idealistically in movements sympathetic to Soviet Russia while they go on painting pictures that would land them in jail under a Communist government. (Hauptman 1973)

These events and perspectives revealed in this paper paint a picture of a country struggling to understand its own art. The combined forces of the cultural cold war and the postwar economic boom led to a culture that treated art as a commodity, valued for what message it can convey about America rather than as art for its own sake. This paper has also shown that artists themselves often have very little control over the narratives that capture and reframe their art.

The relationship between the United States and Abstract Expressionism reveals a deep paradox in American culture. On the one hand, a narrative is constructed about the American culture of freedom and individuality that allowed artists to break free from European tradition and thrive. On the other hand, the art created out of this freedom is only valued if it can be labeled and packaged for consumption as sufficiently American. By understanding Abstract Expressionism as a transnational phenomenon, we gain the ability to see the United States as acting within a larger cultural context. Concerns over this art movement show a country that is anxiously conscious of its perception abroad, at once trying to compete with the dominant European artistic tradition while asserting political beliefs about freedom and systems of government.

Caught between competing ideas of how to articulate American ideals, the contradictory reactions to Abstract Expressionism reveal a uniquely American image of a country trying to define itself through its art. The struggle to categorize Abstract Expressionism as an American movement mirrored the struggle to define a coherent American identity in an international context.

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Appendix A:



Figure 1

Grant Wood

American Gothic

1930

Oil on beaverboard

30 3/4 in × 25 3/4 in

Art Institute of Chicago



Figure 2

Thomas Hart Benton

America Today:

City Activities With Dance Hall

1930-31

Tempera on wood panel

92 x 134 1/2 in

Metropolitan Museum of Art



Figure 3

Jackson Pollock painting in his studio

1950

Photo by Hans Namuth

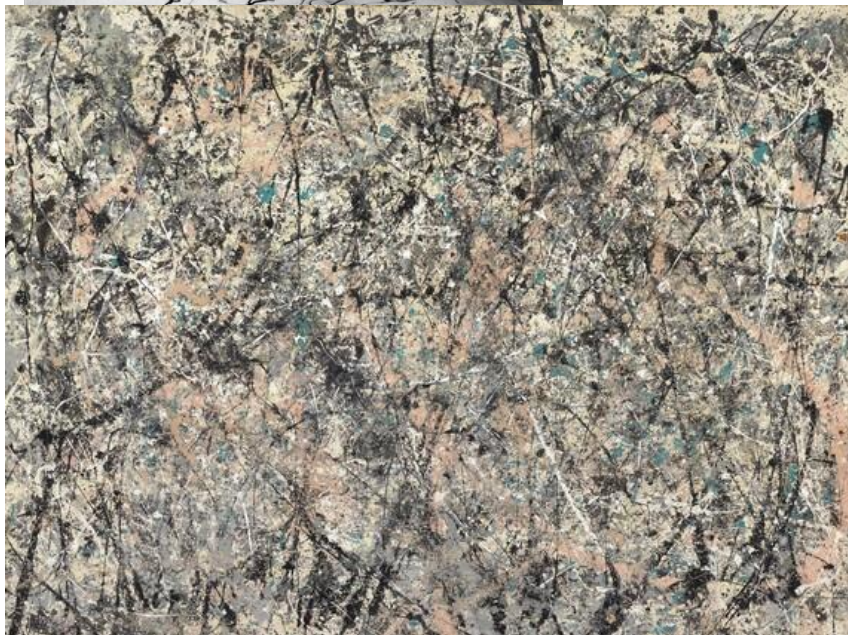


Figure 4

Jackson Pollock

Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)

1950

Oil, enamel, and aluminum
on canvas

87 x 118 in.

National Gallery of Art,
Washington, D.C.



Figure 5:

Yuri Neprintsev

The Rest After Battle

1950

Oil on canvas

Approx. 48 x 75 in.

Private Collection