In David Craven’s “Abstract Expressionism and Third World Art: A Post-Colonial Approach to ‘American’ Art,” he argues against the conception of Abstract Expressionism as the epitome of Modernism and as the endpoint of the teleological development of Western art, and as an expression of the ideology of the ruling class in the United States and the triumph of U.S. culture. He also complicates the orthodox account of how Abstract Expressionism was used by the U.S. government as a form of cultural imperialism by examining its reception and connections to Latin America. Throughout the article, Craven analyzes the works of Abstract Expressionists, such as Jackson Pollock, from the margins, rather than the center, arguing that Abstract Expressionism was neither born purely from Western artistic models, nor did its artists identify themselves with mainstream American culture before and during the Cold War.

By looking at the artwork, professional and personal connections, and what artists said about their own works, Craven demonstrates how Abstract Expressionists tried to distance themselves from European/American artistic traditions and were often connected to Marxist, anti-Imperialist, and other antiestablishment movements. He also provides extensive evidence of the wide-ranging artistic traditions that inspired individual Abstract Expressionists. For example, Jackson Pollock’s work drew on the artistic traditions of Northwest Coast and Southeast Native Americans, and the work of Adolph Gottlieb was also closely related to Northwest Coast American Indian and Latin American art. By looking at statements made by art critics, such as Clement Greenberg, and how Abstract Expressionism was promoted by the U.S. government abroad, Craven also shows how these artworks were distanced from marginal cultures and groups within and outside the United States that many of these artists were part of or shared affinities with.

David Craven gives a convincing post-colonial alternative history of Abstract Expressionism in this article, providing ample evidence of how the art movement developed over time and in different places rather than occurring in New York at a pivotal point in time. His overarching arguments are also based on Marxist ideas as he contends that Abstract Expressionism was never apolitical and the product of global economic and political developments. However, this could be seen as problematic and relates to one of the main criticisms of some post-colonial scholarship. Because post-colonialism does not possess any distinct theoretical methodology, post-colonial writers tend to use other theoretical models. In the case of Craven, although he is trying to look at the Abstract Expressionist movement from the margins, he does so from a Marxist perspective. Because Marxism was developed in the dominant culture of the West, some have argued that it is problematic to use it to analyze the aspects of colonial/marginal cultures.