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. Chapter 2. Imagining the frontier: comparative perspectives from Canada and Australia

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The idea of the frontier reflects a uniquely colonial view of a place and process of encounter between colonising people, indigenous inhabitants, and natural landscapes.^[1] Within this colonial context, the idea of the frontier has been variously developed through history by natural and social scientists, popular historians, artists, writers, and government officials. This volume draws together a similarly diverse group of people who bring somewhat different conceptual approaches and theoretical interests to their studies of the frontier, which raises the immediate question: what do we mean when we talk about 'the frontier'? In the following pages, and before turning to the substantive matter of this paper, I wish to first explore this problem of conceptualisation and definition by surveying how scholars have used the concept of the frontier in studies of colonial societies. The idea of the frontier is not unique to Australia, but is one of the founding metaphors of all settler societies, finding its expression in a range of venues from official histories and literary and artistic productions to political discourse. In the remaining pages I take an ethnographic perspective on the idea of the frontier in settler cultures, and compare how the frontier is imagined within Canadian and Australian notions of national identity and history as expressed in the anti-native title discourse of two leading right-wing political parties: the One Nation Party in Australia and the Reform Party in Canada. I conclude by suggesting some ways in which a comparative analysis of frontier imagery can contribute to an understanding of the unique ways in which north Australian identity, history, and landscape are represented.

Frontier studies in academic scholarship

Frederick Jackson Turner

Any survey of academic studies of the frontier would have to start with a consideration of the work of Frederick Jackson Turner. In 1893 Turner delivered his paper 'The Significance of the Frontier in

American History' to a meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago. Over the next decade Turner's 'frontier thesis' received widespread acclaim among both academics and the general public. Turner became a leading figure in the historical profession over the next decades, and his frontier thesis continued to have a profound influence through much of the 20th century.

What was the frontier thesis? Turner argued that American history, culture, and political institutions were shaped not by America's British heritage, but instead by the unique environment of North America. Specifically, it was from the frontier experience that uniquely American culture and political institutions were forged. As Turner so boldly and succinctly stated in the opening paragraph of his treatise: 'The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development'.^[2] This is what Turner imagined: settlers moving westward to the frontier gradually shed the trappings of civilisation. Surrounded by wilderness, the settlers were in essence overwhelmed by nature. In order to survive and in the absence of a social framework and traditions, settlers were forced to revert to the 'primitive' ways of the 'savages' they encountered: the settler travelled by birch-bark canoe, survived by hunting, lived in a rough log cabin, and 'takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion'.^[3] In short, he underwent a process of social devolution. But soon the settler began to master the wilderness: fields were cleared, towns were created, and a new society developed. The frontier environment, Turner believed, was selective of certain values: individualism, resourcefulness, self-sufficiency, and democracy. What emerged from the frontier crucible was not the old civilisation left behind, but the 'new American' who fully embraced these values, which in turn came to underlie American national character and democratic institutions. This, then, is how the frontier explains American development.

What did Turner mean by the term 'frontier'? Turner used various definitions, claiming that the term was 'an elastic one' that did not need to be clearly defined.^[4] On the one hand, he defined the term by demographic criteria, following the convention of the US Census Bureau, as those zones on the peripheries of regions having a population density (of settlers) of two or more people per square mile.^[5] Seen in these terms, the frontier was a largely uninhabited region (of course, erasing an indigenous presence), and therefore a region of 'free, unoccupied land' (free in the sense that the American government deemed the land open to pre-emption by settlers, regardless of Indian ownership or claims). Turner considered the frontier not as a fixed place, but rather a moving zone of occupation, a moving place that swept from east to west as settlers pushed further and further towards the Pacific. In the early days of settlement, he noted, the frontier was on the Atlantic coast; in the 1820s the frontier was along the Great Lakes and beyond the Mississippi; by 1880 settlers had pushed the frontier westward well into the Great Plains. On the other hand, Turner defined the frontier in a second sense, envisioning it not only as a place but as a process of encounter. The frontier was 'the meeting point between savagery and civilisation',^[6] between man and nature, between settler and Indian. The frontier was a zone of intensive social devolution and reformation, where settlers became stripped of the trappings of civilisation, only to be recreated and reborn into values, traditions, and social forms that Turner considered uniquely American. In short, Turner argued that 'The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanisation'.^[7]

Turner's frontier thesis emerged at a particular time in history. We can see the influence of the 19th century notions of environmental determinism, Social Darwinism, cultural evolutionism and Manifest Destiny. Nor was Turner the first to assert the importance of the frontier to American history and culture. Others before him, from Benjamin Franklin to Thomas Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt, had linked the frontier experience to the creation of uniquely American democratic institutions and the

values of independence, individualism, self-sufficiency, resistance to imposed authority, and so on.^[8] For over a century American literature had described the frontier experience: in this corpus of work American history *became* the history of the frontier, which in turn came to define American national identity.^[9] The immense popularity of Turner's frontier thesis had less to do with the novelty of his ideas – Turner merely adapted ideas and sentiments that had long existed about the frontier to the setting of academic history as an explanatory theory. But he did so at a time in which public attention was focused on the frontier region of the nation.

In the 1890s the frontier was officially announced to have closed: non-indigenous settlement had spread to all reaches of the nation, and there were no more tracts of 'free land' available for settlers to pre-empt. To many it signalled a critical juncture in American history. For three hundred years colonists and settlers had based their existence around the relatively unrestricted pursuit and exploitation of natural resources, from which a distinct set of political and cultural values had developed. What would happen to these values and traditions once the frontier had disappeared? By the late 1800s the closure of the agrarian frontier was coupled with an increasing industrialisation of the agrarian economy and a concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few individuals and companies, while independent farmers were losing land to debt and becoming tenants on industrial properties.^[10] Turner's frontier thesis, in this respect, had two functions. First, it served as a legitimisation and celebration of the processes of American colonisation and the dispossession of the lands of indigenous peoples. In Turner's account, indigenous peoples and their ownership to traditional territories were erased through the image of the 'free land with abundant resources' and the image of indigenous savagery, an image that only justified the purportedly retributive acts of settler violence, settlers having inevitably 'become like Indians' under the force of the frontier. Second and more significantly, Turner's frontier thesis, having established the legitimacy of settlement and dispossession, then idealised the agrarian past while crystallizing growing public concerns about the future of the nation. It served as a populist critique of the developing social and political inequalities in American society, inequalities that many believed threatened the very values and ideals that the frontier represented.^[11]

Turner's frontier thesis enjoyed remarkable popularity through the early 20th century. Despite its origins in a Western populist critique, the frontier thesis was taken up by Eastern political conservatives who promoted, in the words of one critic, a 'complacent nationalist romanticism' in which 'the notion of an aggressive pioneering national spirit nurtured by repeated exposure to primitive conditions became a means to national self-glorification'.^[12] Beginning in the 1920s the thesis was subjected to a number of significant challenges from within the discipline. Scholars critiqued the frontier thesis for overemphasizing the single determining influence of the frontier environment and for ignoring how other forces, such as class struggle, urbanisation, industrialisation, Protestantism, ethnic heterogeneity, the slave system, and the growth of international capitalism, had influenced the course of American history.^[13] Nevertheless, and in part due to the frontier thesis's association with a strident American nationalism, Turner's influence lingered for many decades while interest in studies of the American west waned.

It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that interest again arose in the history of the American west, and a new approach began to emerge to challenge the frontier thesis. By the 1980s, under the influence of such historians as Patricia Limerick, Richard White, and Donald Worster, this new approach began to take form as the New Western History.

The New Western History

The New Western History movement has been shaped by a number of social forces in the 1960s and 1970s, namely the rise of public concern with race relations, women's rights, Indian rights, multiculturalism and ethnic pluralism. The New Western History reflects the intellectual influence of both feminist scholarship and the new social history in general, which emphasises the diversity of historical experiences and the need to recover voices of the 'ordinary' people often ignored by nationalist, grand-level historical studies. Much of the early writing took the form of polemic denunciation of the Turnerian legacy in Western history, with promoters attempting to mark off ways in which the new approach was unique. Following Patricia Limerick's characterisation,^[14] and supplemented by other contributors to the volume *Trails: Toward a New Western History*,^[15] we come up with the following features.

Scholars such as Limerick have entirely rejected use of the term 'frontier' as an object of study, the term being too 'nationalistic', 'racist', and ethnocentric to be useful.^[16] Rather than focusing on the frontier as a process, a moving line of encounter (in Turner's second sense of the term), many New Western Historians focus on the West as a distinct place, the West being that region from the Mississippi to the Pacific, although these boundaries are also debated. Unlike Turner, who saw the purported disappearance of the frontier in the 1890s as a pivotal event signifying a radical disjuncture in Western history, the new historians argue that there has been no such discontinuity, and that the West has remained a distinctive region into the present.^[17] These historians are interested in recovering the voices of the multiple populations that inhabited and settled the West: different indigenous peoples, Hispanics, Chinese, blacks, women, and others. This contrasts sharply with Turner's simplistic formulation of the frontier encounter involving only two groups: white male settlers and generic 'Indians'. The new historians are interested in looking at the environment not as a barrier to Western expansion, but a component that changes with human interaction. They highlight how ecological factors, and human/environment interactions, influenced the path of Western history. Challenging Turner's celebratory approach that emphasised frontier social harmony and egalitarianism, the new historians are examining also the tragedies of western expansion: the destruction of the environment, the massacres of indigenous populations, the ambiguities, difficulties and disappointments of settlers' lives. As a result, they are stripping the frontier, the expansion of settlement Westward, of much of its sacredness as a source of national values. Finally, the new historians are redefining the historian's social role, and (in at least some instances) are abandoning their image of neutral objectivity and displaying an empathetic and critical concern with their subjects of study.

Despite the above summary, the New Western History is by no means a coherent field. Indeed, a significant literature debates just precisely what this approach constitutes and just how unique it really is from the Turnerian legacy. For example, Faragher,^[18] Steiner,^[19] Klein,^[20] Wrobel,^[21] and Bogue^[22] all highlight continuities between the 'old' and 'new' Western histories. There has also been a move to reclaim the 'f-word'.^[23] Simply abandoning the term 'frontier' does not protect historical analyses from ethnocentrism, Klein believes, and in his view the term is not too laden with implicit ethnocentrism that it cannot be successfully resuscitated. Several scholars have recently re-introduced the term into their analyses, defining the frontier as a zone of cultural interaction.^[24] In all, what the new Western histories provide is not so much a new paradigm, but an opening up of multiple perspectives and possibilities for new critical intellectual inquiries into the study of the American West.

Richard Slotkin and the frontier myth

A third figure that has contributed immensely to contemporary frontier studies is Richard Slotkin, Professor of English and Director of American Studies at Wesleyan University. In a sense, Slotkin's mission is similar to that of the New Western Historians: to escape the ideological baggage of the frontier thesis, and to look anew at American history. Slotkin, instead, turns the idea of the frontier in the United States itself into a subject of critical inquiry.

Slotkin has written three volumes tracing the development of the 'frontier myth' over three centuries of American history.^[25] The frontier myth, he argues, is one of the most important cultural myths shaping public understandings of European colonisation and settlement in the United States. It consists of a constellation of narratives, symbols and metaphors that flow through American literature (including the earliest of settler autobiographies of the 18th century, 19th century dime novels, and contemporary pioneer literature); performative arts (including early Wild West shows and today's Hollywood movies), and 19th and 20th century political discourse legitimizing American domestic and foreign policy. Despite the different formulations of the frontier myth in these very different social, economic and historical contexts (and Slotkin includes Turner's frontier thesis as one expression of the frontier myth), in its most common 'progressivist' formulation the frontier myth has several standard features.^[26]

The frontier myth portrays North America as an empty, unoccupied wilderness (notwithstanding occasional acknowledgment of the indigenous presence) where resources are rich and land is free for the taking; or, if not exactly free, the land becomes the rightful spoil of war for those representing the interests of civilisation and progress. The symbolic landscape of the frontier narrative is marked by boundaries and by the encounter of opposites: civilisation and savagery, man and nature, Whites and Indians, good and evil. These encounters are characterised in terms of conflict and violence as the protagonist struggles against the harsh environment, the unknown and potentially hostile Indians, the savagery of the empty land. Eventually these encounters are resolved through domination and conquest, through the subordination of Indians, nature, and evil to the forces of progress, civilisation, and the ultimate will of God. The triumph of the protagonist highlights the triumph of the values of self-reliance, democracy, competition, and freedom, values that continue to define American ideals in the present.

The frontier myth thus provides a theory of history in which conflict, violence, and the subjugation of nature and indigenous peoples are legitimated as natural and inevitable for ensuring the 'progress' of civilisation. The frontier myth provides a master narrative of 'regeneration through violence', through which American identity was initially defined, and continues to be continually reasserted, through acts of aggressive violence.^[27] Slotkin sees this key metaphor of regeneration through violence, and this foundational narrative of history, to be continually expressed in diverse arenas of cultural and political activity, ranging from the military aggression of American foreign policy to the crop of urban vigilante movies produced by Hollywood in the 1980s. It is through such acts of heroic, aggressive intervention that American national identity is continually expressed and celebrated.

The resilience of the frontier myth as a dominant cultural myth is due to two features. The first is its flexibility: it provides a set of narratives, symbols, images and metaphors that can be used either to affirm or to contest existing social and political arrangements. Populist forms of the frontier myth, Slotkin argues, have been among the most important vehicles for public criticism in the 20th century.^[28] These narratives construct ideal images of the past (ranging from romantic notions of pre-contact Aboriginal life to the idyllic images of 19th century agrarian communities of the American

West) and launch critiques of the policies and developments that have brought about an abandonment of older traditional values and the destruction of social ties. Turner's frontier thesis is one such example. What remains consistent in populist versions is the standard narrative structure of the frontier myth: the binary encounter of opposites on the frontier, the centrality of conflict and violence to their encounter, and the outcome of absolute conquest; now however, the moral weighting of these agents and outcomes is reversed.

Second, the frontier myth conveys historical truths not so much through explicit, argumentative forms of discourse, but indirectly through narratives rich in symbolism and metaphor. 'The language is metaphorical and suggestive rather than logical or analytical', Slotkin asserts. 'The movement of a mythic narrative, like that of any story, implies a theory of cause and effect and therefore a theory of history (or even of cosmology); but these ideas are offered in a form that disarms critical analysis by its appeal to the structures and traditions of storytelling and the clichés of historical memory.'^[29] Of particular importance are 'mythic icons', which stand as condensed symbols of the frontier myth's narrative, and which 'effect a poetic construction of tremendous economy and compression and a mnemonic device capable of evoking a complex system of historical associations by a single image or phrase'.^[30] The symbol of the 'pioneer', the 'empty wilderness', and even 'the frontier' are classic examples of mythic icons. Their power, thus, lies in their ability to convey certain myths of history intuitively and indirectly in such a subtle manner that often lies beyond our critical awareness.

What can we conclude about the concept of the frontier in academic studies of colonial histories? First, the term has been used in two quite distinct senses: as a descriptive/analytical term describing a presumably empirical reality, and as a social construction having no reality outside of the cultural imaginings of colonial societies. Is there such a thing as the frontier? In one of Turner's definitions, the frontier was a demographic phenomenon, a region where white settlers were scarce. In another definition, it was a more ambiguous zone of interaction between early settlers/fur traders and Indians/wilderness. In later definitions, the frontier becomes a specifically cultural frontier, a zone of cultural interaction.^[31] The term retains its ethnocentric vantage: in its implicit association with expansion into an unknown region, it remains the view of the coloniser, the view from one 'side' of the encounter. There are alternatives; for example, the more neutral term 'borderlands' has been used instead to describe early processes of cultural encounter between colonizing and indigenous peoples.^[32]

But what about the term's analytical adequacy? If we use 'frontier' more in an analytical than a descriptive sense, is it useful in assessing patterns of contact between indigenous and colonizing peoples and cultures? Scholars such as Patricia Limerick remain opposed on various grounds, including the term's ethnocentricity, the impreciseness of its definition, and the fact that it leads scholars to only reproduce the error of previous historians who overemphasised the role of the frontier in shaping American history.^[33] Further, it is difficult to define the boundaries of the frontier. In many regions of North America, for example, both the material and ideological products of colonizing peoples (the horse, metal goods, ideas and symbols of Christianity) long preceded any direct contact between indigenous peoples and colonisers. This zone of cultural contact is complex and cannot be easily narrowed to a particular place or a span of time. And if, as Slotkin argues, the frontier is a classical mythic icon that carries the burden of the frontier myth through implicit associations and meanings, can the term be stripped of its ethnocentric meanings to be successfully resuscitated and applied to contemporary analyses? Despite careful attempts to define and contextualise our use of the term, can we in fact control how the term is understood by our readership? What meanings may we be inadvertently communicating when we use the term?

There is no easy solution to these questions; that the term seems to be making reappearance in Western American history is indicative of its compelling force, although I would caution scholars (including myself) that we continue to use the term as an analytical device at our own peril. On the other hand, that frontier is an ethnographic reality (as opposed to a descriptive reality or an analytical construct) is beyond question: it is one of the key, founding metaphors of virtually all settler-colonial societies, and serves as a continual source of symbols in the construction of national histories and identities. These are the issues that I now turn to examine.

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The 'frontier' in Canadian and Australian anti-native title discourse
