

ENGL 2115: American Frontiers

TTH 9:35-10:50am | Cheryl Higashida



The idea of the frontier is central to how U.S. Americans think of themselves and their country – consider the following passage from Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”: That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness, that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients, that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends, that restless, nervous energy, that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom -- these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier.

So it’s not surprising that in seeking to develop a distinct national literature, U.S. American writers turn time and again to the frontier for subjects and themes. At the same time, the frontier complicates mythmaking and storytelling by undoing distinctions between good and evil, civilization and savagery, freedom and captivity, democracy and tyranny. Consequently, the frontier has also inspired artists and thinkers to question, critique, and re-imagine the U.S. and its borders from multiple vantage points. We will explore the ways that ideas, cultures, and histories of the frontier have been taken up in U.S. literature and culture.

We will investigate the frontier’s lasting impact on early American writing (James Fenimore Cooper, *The Deerslayer*), regionalism (Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*), modernism (Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*), popular genres (Ray Bradbury, *The Martian Chronicles*; Emma Pérez, *Forgetting the Alamo*; Stephen Graham Jones, *The Bird is Gone*), film (*The Searchers*), short fiction (Bret Harte, Maxine Hong Kingston), poetry (John Rollins Ridge, Cathy Park Hong), and music (“Buffalo Soldier,” “Old Town Road”).