

A New Paradigm for Rewriting the Literary History of the American Frontiers

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1.

For a collection entitled *Journeys in New Worlds: Early American Women's Narratives*, I prepared an edition of the 1783-84 travel diary of Elizabeth House Trist.¹ Acknowledging in my introduction that this was the first time the diary had appeared in print, I noted the diary's importance as the first account we know of by a *white* woman travelling the Ohio-Mississippi River frontier just after the Revolutionary War; and I noted its graphic elaboration of white women's characteristic hostility to those features of the frontier wilderness landscape which they experienced as overpowering, oppressive, or engulfing.

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¹ "The Travel Diary of Elizabeth House Trist: Philadelphia to Natchez, 1783-84," edited, with an Introduction, by Annette Kolodny in *Journeys in New Worlds: Early American Women's Narratives*, eds. William L. Andrews, Sargent Bush, Jr., Annette Kolodny, Amy Schragar Lang, and Daniel B. Shea (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. 181-232. An earlier discussion of the diary appeared in Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*. (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1984), pp. 37-47.

I also pointed to the fact that the diary tells the story of a landscape in such rapid transition that even those responsible for the changes cannot accommodate them to consciousness. More than once in her diary, after all, Trist accounts herself fortunate because “the owners of the Boat seem to be well acquainted with the Rivers, this being the fifth time they have gone down the Ohio” (Trist 221). Despite this apparently privileged opportunity to observe, firsthand, the evidence of increasing Euro-American population—the very population that requires the flatboat’s services for trade—the crew repeatedly sets off on hunting expeditions along the shore as if the crush of emigration had not already had an impact. Time and again, however, Trist reports, the “hunters return’d without any game” (Trist 217). Never tempted by the appeal of a wilderness frontier, the female observer Trist sees what the male flatboat crew cannot: “There are such numbers of boats continually going down the river that all the game have left the shore” (Trist 217).

Another major focus of my introduction was my discovery that the diary was composed for—and probably composed at the request of—Thomas Jefferson. Having established the fact of a long-term friendship between Trist and Jefferson—a friendship that began when Jefferson lodged at her mother’s Philadelphia boardinghouse for meetings of the Continental Congress—I analyzed the diary as a response to Jefferson’s well-known curiosity about the western territories. Let us remember that, while in the *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Paris 1784) Jefferson speculated about the sources of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers and postulated vast mineral deposits beyond the Ohio, he himself had never been farther west than Staunton, Virginia, just beyond the Blue Ridge Mountains. All his information had been gathered from friends and acquaintances who had travelled west. Thus, the particularities of Jefferson’s interests—his scientific fascination with fossil remains, his studies in botany, geography, and mineralogy, and his political concern for the future economic prospects of the western lands—all influenced the entries that Trist would make. As a result, I argued, many features of Trist’s travel diary anticipated the charge that Jefferson would give, nineteen years later, to the Lewis and Clark expedition, following upon his presidential purchase of the Louisiana Territory in 1803.

However interesting the Jefferson connection may be as a footnote to history, or as a guide to reading Trist intertextually with reports from Lewis

and Clark, what intrigues me most about this diary today is its revelation of the frontier as an inherently unstable locus of generally unacknowledged transitions and cultural interpenetrations. Because the only available passage downriver for a traveller like Trist was aboard one of the many flatboats that plied the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers for trade, the diarist enjoyed unusual opportunities to view the multiracial and international mix of inhabitants. On June 22, 1784, for example, several of the crew load bags of flour into the canoe and head for a Spanish garrison. On June 30, a stopover at a plantation landing engages Trist in conversation with “a Mulatto Woman nam’d Nelly” (Trist 230). And various parties of French and Canadians are also mentioned.

No less important—and despite Trist’s fearful attitude toward the Native people she encounters—Trist includes in her narrative, wholly without comment, the Indian words “squaw” and “calumet,” taking for granted her reader’s acquaintance with those terms. And she indicates that the Indians were similarly employing English words.

In effect, Trist’s diary both describes and enacts a complex *web of negotiations*: the deep structure of warfare and political negotiations that successively transferred control of this landscape from Indians to Europeans and later, to “Americans”; the economic trade negotiations between the flatboat and the various settlers and Native peoples; the constant renegotiation of expectations regarding the physical environment and its supply of resources, a process as crucial to Trist as it is to the flatboat crew; the linguistic negotiations that allow the flatboat crew and the Indians to communicate with one another, negotiations that result in hybridized expressions for both; and Trist’s own internal renegotiation of her fear-filled expectations of the Indians and her one, actual, surprisingly benign encounter with a small group. “They had all the appearance of friendship,” she records (Trist 222).

This brings me to the conceptual core of the current essay. Taking advantage of the recent work of a number of scholars,² I propose a radical

² In conference papers too numerous to list here, in personal correspondence and conversations, Norman S. Grabo has generously shared his study of the first European writings produced within what is now the continental United States, examining works in Spanish, French, and Dutch, as well as English. See also William C. Spengemann, *A Mirror for Americanists: Reflections on the Idea of American Literature* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1989); Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1975); William Cronon, Jr.,

re-visioning of the concept of frontier so that we can better understand the cultural and linguistic interpenetrations revealed by a diary like Trist's. To recover and reconstruct the linguistic and textual encodings of seriate interpenetrations such as these would allow us, at last, to embark on a long overdue literary history of the American frontiers. My aim is to initiate just such a project—in an effort to reconceive what we mean by “history” when we address literary history and to reconceptualize what we mean by “frontier” when we intend the Americas. My strategy is to offer an approach that allows for a more inclusive interdisciplinarity, mitigates the condescension with which we have traditionally treated the impact of region on the construction of literary texts, and, at the same time, frees American literary history from the persistent theories of continuity that have made it virtually impossible to treat frontier materials as other than marginalia or cultural mythology. For scholars of early American literature—the field in which I was trained—my approach necessarily complicates the notion of *earliness* but, at the same time, promises liberation from the stultifying habit of regarding that literature merely as precursor to an authentic literature yet to follow or as transition pieces between British forebears and American identities.

To effect this project will require that Americanist scholars let go our grand obsessions with narrowly geographic or strictly chronological frameworks and, instead, recognize “frontier” as a locus of first cultural contact, circumscribed by a particular physical terrain in the process of change *because of* the forms that contact takes, all of it inscribed by the collisions and interpenetrations of language. My paradigm would thus have us interrogating language—especially as hybridized style, trope, story, or structure—for the complex intersections of human encounters and human encounters with the physical environment. It would enjoin us to see the ways in which the collision of languages encodes the physical terrain as a player equally implicated in the drama of contact as the human participants, with the landscape variously enabling, thwarting, or even evoking human actions and desires.

Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1989); Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Harper and Row, 1984); and *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared*, eds. Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981).

Although the figurative elements of such contacts do not concern them, historians Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson similarly “regard a frontier not as a boundary or line, but as a territory or zone of interpenetration between . . . previously distinct societies.” For them, “there are three essential elements in any frontier situation: territory; two or more initially distinct peoples; and the process by which the relations among the peoples in the territory begin, develop, and eventually crystalize.”³ My own definition incorporates theirs, asserting that there always stands at the heart of frontier literature—even when disguised or repressed—a physical terrain that, for at least one group of participants, is newly encountered and is undergoing change because of that encounter; a currently indigenous population and at least one group of newcomers or “intruders”; and the collisions and negotiations of distinct cultural groups as expressed “en el choque e interacción” of languages and texts.⁴ Whether written or oral, the texts that comprise this new literary history of the frontiers would be identified by their articulation of these initial encounters. Thus, the literature of the frontiers may be identified by its encoding of some specifiable first moment in the evolving dialogue between different cultures and languages and their engagement with one another and with the physical terrain.

The materials that qualify as the primary or proto-texts of frontier literary history would be those that themselves participate in that first moment of contact—the Eskimo legends of the Tunnit, the strangers who came from afar and erected stone buildings;⁵ Christopher Columbus’ “Letter to Lord Sanchez . . . on His First Voyage”; Amerigo Vespucci’s *Mundus Novus*; Gaspar Perez de Villagra’s *Historia de la Nueva Mexico*; William Bradford’s *History of Plimmoth Plantation*; Mary White Rowlandson’s captivity narrative, or Daniel Boone’s putative autobiography. The secondary—but no less important—texts of frontier literary history would be those com-

³ Leonard Thompson and Howard Lamar, “Comparative Frontier History,” in *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared*, pp. 7, 8.

⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987), p. 46.

⁵ See G. M. Gathorne-Hardy’s *The Norse Discoverers of America: The Wineland Sagas* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1921; rpt. 1970), which makes the provocative suggestion that Eskimo legends of the people they call the “Tunnit” refer to contacts with Vikings from Greenland, pp. viii.

posed after the fact, reworking for some alternate audience or future generation the scene and meaning of original contact, or “recovering” the primary texts so as to give them new readings in a newly imagined and reconstructed past. Examples in English include Joel Barlow’s awkward epic poem, *The Columbiad* (1807). Among novels that represent examples of significant secondary texts in English, I would certainly include James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking series, Willa Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and Leslie Silko’s 1978 novel, *Ceremony*—with its subtext evoking a twentieth-century nuclear culture intruding itself into the sacred sites of the Indian southwest.

What makes the paradigm so appealing, however, is that English texts, by themselves, could never constitute a sufficient history. Indeed, the new frontier literary history that I envisage might well begin with a comparative analysis of the Eskimo legends of the Tunnit and the Icelandic and Greenland versions of Norse sagas detailing the discovery and attempted colonization of Vineland, on the North American coast, by Scandinavian explorers from Greenland and Iceland about the year 1000. Recording clashes between Vikings and “Skraellings”—indigenous peoples who may well have been an Eskimo people migrating south—the sagas describe “a fair, well-wooded country” and the appeal “of all the valuable products of the land, grapes, and all kinds of game and fish.” The dramatic elements center on the frustrated attempts of the Skraellings to barter with the Europeans and the Europeans’ frustration at the fact that “neither (people) could understand the other’s language.”⁶

Without question, a revised literary history of the frontiers would also include the foundational corpus of the Hispanoamerican written tradition, the *cronicas de Indias*, with texts by *criollo* and mestizo authors alike.⁷ Examples include not only the letters and diaries of the more notorious explorers

⁶ Quoted in Edward F. Gray, *Leif Eriksson: Discoverer of America, A.D. 1003* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1930; rpt. New York: Kraus Reprint, 1972), pp. 46, 59; Gray offers serviceable translations from both Greenland and Icelandic versions of all extant texts dealing with the Vikings in Vineland. His comparison of the different versions is useful, and his argument that Vineland was actually in the vicinity of Cape Cod is tantalizing.

⁷ The best recent overview of this material is Jose Promis, *The Identity of Hispanoamerica: An Interpretation of Colonial Literature*, trans. Alita Kelley and Alec E. Kelley (Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Press, 1991), to which I am much indebted for my discussion here.

and conquistadores from Columbus on but, as well, the journal of Cabeza de Vaca's wanderings from Florida to Texas (1555), Bartolome de las Casas' *Historia de las Indias* (1527-61), and arguably the first epic poem composed in what is now the United States, Gaspar Perez de Villagra's *History of New Mexico* (1610). A key text for examining the way in which frontiers inevitably give rise to hybridized forms would be the massive two-volume *Royal Commentaries of the Incas and General History of Peru* (published in Spain in separate segments in 1609 and 1616-17).⁸ Claiming noble Spanish blood from his father and descent from the royal Inca line on his maternal side, Garcilaso de la Vega, El Inca, intentionally took on the name of the great medieval Spanish warrior-poet, Garcilaso de la Vega (ca. 1502-36), in order to compose a text that at once justifies and mourns the demise of the Inca empire. By employing narrative structures from Incan *haravi* (oral verse histories), chivalric romance, and European discovery narratives, the Inca Garcilaso pits the narrative impulse of the Quechua *haravi* chants to celebrate the victories and glories of the ancestors against a distinctly Spanish Golden Age impulse to retell epic victories and reveal epic betrayals. Significantly, Inca Garcilaso de la Vega's *Royal Commentaries* demonstrates the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between a prior oral tradition and the intrusion of a written literature. The oral (or folkloric) elements have not simply been appropriated or incorporated into the European structures. Rather, their inclusion has fundamentally altered the narrative patterns that previously governed the written genres.

But the interplay between European and indigenous traditions is also inadequate to any comprehensive understanding of the literary history of the American frontiers. There were, after all, as Leonard Thompson and Howard Lamar remind us, "frontier processes in precolonial America . . . as when Pueblo-dwelling agriculturalists and Apachean hunter-collectors confronted one another in present-day New Mexico and Arizona."⁹ With perhaps 550 different languages and dialects in use north of the Rio Grande River, rooted in at least nine distinct linguistic stocks, the peoples of precolonial North America repeatedly engaged in exchanges of vocabulary, stories, and oral

⁸ Garcilaso de la Vega, El Inca, *Royal Commentaries of the Incas and General History of Peru*, trans. Harold V. Livermore (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1966; 2nd. printing 1970).

⁹ Thompson and Lamar, "Comparative Frontier History," p. 11.

lore as they traded with or invaded one another, or simply migrated into another group's territory. This hybridizing process was only accelerated when, under pressure from land-hungry Euro-Americans, native peoples withdrew—or, more often, were forcibly removed—from traditional territories to new areas or reservations. In some instances, as with the Delawares, previously separate peoples came together for the first time, postcontact, forging wholly new cultural patterns.

Additionally, the encounter of African languages with English, Dutch, French, and Spanish-speaking slave-holders must certainly figure into any meaningful understanding of the songs, narrative play, and captivity (or slave) narratives which recall African-Americans' original forced removal to a frontier defined by chattel slavery. When "frontier" is reconceptualized in terms of initial encounters between distinct peoples and the accompanying environmental transitions, then neither the black cowboys nor the Black Seminoles of the nineteenth century are any longer anomalous.¹⁰ And the engagement of African-American fiction writers—from Charles Chestnutt onward—with recapturing the voices and cadences of antebellum landscapes emerge clearly as successive projects to reconstitute for later generations an oral tradition's remembered meaning of first contact.

Equally important, because neither chronology nor geography define the historical frame, an entire corpus of what we now loosely term "immigrant literature" might be given fresh analysis because it could, on the one hand, be uncoupled from the imputed continuities of a New England "errand"; and, on the other, be anchored to a landscape in the process of change, regardless of what kind of landscape is involved. Thus, some of the "American" materials in Yiddish by Sholem Aleichem (the pen name of Solomon Rabinowitz), Mary Antin's original Yiddish *From Plotzk to Boston* (which she edited and translated into English for publication in 1899), and the work of Anzia Yezierska would enter a literary history that recognized the concept of urban frontiers. Aleichem's World War I-era evocation of fledgling Jewish communities newly removed from rural *shtetls* in eastern Europe to teeming

¹⁰ See Kenneth W. Porter, *The Negro on the American Frontier* (New York: Arno Press, 1971); Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr., *Africans and Seminoles: From Removal to Emancipation* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1977); and Edwin C. McReynolds, *The Seminoles* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1957).

tenements on Manhattan's lower east side, for example, might resonate with new meanings when compared to Carlos Bulosan's World War II era revolution at fleeing the Phillipines only to find in America "the city where"

The streets scream for life, where men are hunting
 Each other with burning eyes,
 mountains are made of sand,
 Glass, paper from factories where death is calling
 For peace; hills are made of clothes, and trees
 Are nothing but candies.¹¹

In a related move, to get at yet another set of complex frontier responses, scholarship would seek to recover letters, diaries, poems, and fictions composed by Chinese and other Asians brought to labor in the silver mines or on the railroads in the nineteenth century. Here we could study the Asians grappling both with their own preconceptions of America as well as with the language and conceptual patterns of the Euro-Americans who employ them, even as they helped to transform the dominant culture's already mythologized agrarian landscape into an industrial frontier.

There are, of course, other examples, but for the most part, I think I've made my point: To establish a truly comprehensive frontier literary history, both geography and chronology must be viewed as fluid and ongoing, or as a continually unfolding palimpsest that requires us to include Old Norse, Papago, Nahuatl, Quechua, Spanish, Yaqui, Tewa, Gullah, French, Dutch, Chinese, Japanese, German, Yiddish, etc.—as well as English—within our textual canon. Hybridized forms and tropes constitute the focus of textual analysis, and the resultant attentiveness to "code switching" radically alters our understanding of style and aesthetics. By "code-switching," I refer to the ability of writers from specific ethnic or cultural groups to move in and out of dominant language patterns while including vocabulary, allusions, or references that will be especially recognizable to members of their own ethnic or cultural group. In this manner, a text may carry multiple layers of meaning—even contradictory meanings—and notify its readers that it is intended for

¹¹ Carlos Bulosan, *Letter from America* (Prairie City, Ill.: Decker, 1942), p. 20. For an analysis of the poem and its provenance, see Oscar V. Campomanes and Todd S. Gernes, "Two Letters from America: Carlos Bulosan and the Act of Writing," *MELUS* 15, 3 (Fall 1988): 15-46.

more than one audience. As a literary device, codeswitching enacts a form of linguistic play central to my definitions of a frontier text.

In effect, in my reformulation, the term "frontier" comes to mean what we in the American southwest call *la frontera*, or the borderlands, that liminal landscape of changing meanings on which distinct human cultures first encounter one another's "otherness" and appropriate, accommodate, or domesticate it through language. By concentrating on frontier as an inherently unstable locus of (generally unacknowledged, at least at the outset) environmental transitions and cultural interpenetrations, however, I have purposefully dropped two features which previously were assumed: population scarcity and either primitive technology or a site where a more developed, or superior, technology overwhelms an inferior one. Both concepts are wilfully ahistorical.

The population densities of pre-contact peoples in the Americas which are now being radically reassessed as the full implications of imported European diseases are better understood. Recent evidence suggests that the imported diseases not only decimated native populations but, more crucially, may have left a portion of the survivors sterile or infertile. As a result, many European colonizers encountered dramatically diminished numbers of indigenous inhabitants, the diseases often travelling the native trade routes well ahead of direct contact. The immediate consequences were exaggerated reports back to Europe of an empty "wilderness" there for the taking and the tenacious grip of a mythology of sparsely settled frontiers.

The original native populations had developed extensive and sophisticated trade routes, with major trade centers established from South America to the present-day middle west, the intricate road system branching out from Chaco Canyon (in north-central New Mexico) being only one example. The frontier contacts of these peoples included constant exchanges of technology, from building techniques to basket weaving and pottery. In the first recorded contact with European peoples, moreover, the Skraelings effectively repulsed the Norse colonizing effort, forcing the Scandinavians to abandon the Vineland settlement after only three years. As Wilcomb Washburn observes, at this point, "the technological levels of the two peoples were not far apart." "Even Columbus and his followers did not arrive with overwhelming technological superiority," Washburn continues. "The native inhabitants of the New

World had the same bow-and-arrow technology from which Europeans had only recently graduated to crude firearms."¹² Moreover, the Spanish chronicles of conquest are filled with expressions of awe at the accomplishments of Incan stonework (which even today cannot be replicated); and the letters and diaries of seventeenth and eighteenth-century English colonists contain repeated references to the Indians' ability to produce rich harvests with only a digging stick as compared to the meagre crops that resulted from metal tools. Soon enough, of course, Europeans learned to adopt Indian fertilizing techniques, while the Indians appropriated iron cooking pots, firearms, and metal instruments useful for hunting, gathering, and planting. Rather than defining a frontier as a site of primitive or disparate technologies, therefore, it might prove more useful to think in terms of competing *appropriate* technologies and rapid technological exchange and innovation. This allows us to encompass *all* frontiers—"wilderness," agricultural, urban, and industrial alike. And it prevents us from ignoring, as part of our frontier equation, the impact of technological exchange on the physical environment.

2.

For critics and scholars, for historians of literature, and even for those who create literature out of them, borderlands are never "a comfortable territory to live in." Too often, "the prominent features of this landscape," as Gloria Anzaldua attests, are "hatred, anger, and exploitation."¹³ Nonetheless, there are compelling reasons to adopt the reformulation I have outlined here. First, by understanding the frontier as a specifiable first moment on that liminal borderland between distinct cultures, we forever de-center what was previously a narrowly Eurocentric design. As such, we constrain the continuing assertion of vast unsettled or uninhabited areas, no matter how powerfully that notion permeates the texts we would analyze; we afford ourselves the scholarly occasion to examine a variety of contacts between native peo-

¹² Wilcomb E. Washburn, "Epilogue," in Philip Kopper, *The Smithsonian Book of North American Indians: Before the Coming of the Europeans* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1986), p. 269.

¹³ Anzaldua, Preface, n.p.

ples; and we inhibit the tendency to develop frontier models that exclude certain groups from their rightful place in an ongoing pioneering process on a variety of different kinds of landscapes.¹⁴ Second, we engage energizing interdisciplinary challenges that demand comparative cultural and literary analyses in which anthropology, geography, ecology, and literary history can work together in new ways. At the very least, in Paul Lauter's view, literary scholars will come "to appreciate a broader range of conventions, to set form more fully into historical and functional context[s], and to comprehend how audience expectation and assumption mandate formal priorities."¹⁵ And third, by acknowledging the many different configurations of indigenous peoples, immigrants, and emigrants who came in contact over time on a variety of landscapes, we allow the literatures of the frontiers to stand—accurately, at last—as multilingual, polyvocal, and newly inter-textual and multi-cultural. In consequence, we find ourselves better able to understand the meanings and trace the genesis of hybridized forms and usages—whether they occur as a borrowing of vocabulary from indigenous peoples, as in John Smith or Elizabeth House Trist, or as an adaption by mestizo generations of European discovery tracts, as in Garcilaso de la Vega, *El Inca*.

¹⁴ An example of this kind of exclusionary model appears in Robert E. Spiller, "The Cycle and the Roots: National Identity in American Literature," in *Toward a New American Literary History*, eds. Louis J. Budd, Edwin H. Cady, and Carl L. Anderson (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 3-18. Although Spiller acknowledges their "great importance to the American literary identity today," he nonetheless excludes "three kinds of ethnic groups" from "the main frontier movement. These are the immigrant groups which came to this country comparatively late; the blacks who were brought to this country under special circumstances; and the Jews who in all their history have mingled with, but rarely become totally absorbed into, any alien culture." As Spiller explains, "only immigrations from European countries other than Great Britain followed a course close enough to our model to suggest inclusion here" (15). Spiller eliminates any discussion of Asian immigrants by ignoring the mining, urban, and industrial frontiers; he appears ignorant of the numbers of blacks who escaped their "special circumstances" to relative safety on the frontiers (see note 10 above); and he appears equally ignorant of the Ladino-speaking Spanish Jews (or Sephardim) who escaped the long arm of the Inquisition by fleeing to the New World as conversos and establishing communities in what is now the United States southwest. For a useful introduction to this last group, see Frances Hernandez, "The Secret Legacy of Christopher Columbus in the Southwest," in *Password* 35, 2 (Summer 1990): 55-70.

¹⁵ Paul Lauter, "The Literatures of America: A Comparative Discipline," in *Redefining American Literary History*, eds. A. Lavonne Brown Ruoff and Jerry W. Ward, Jr. (New York: Modern Language Assoc., 1990), p. 29.

I am particularly intrigued by the possibility that this frontier paradigm may also invite an even richer contribution to American literary studies from Americanist scholars living and working abroad. With their special insights into a local culture and language—be it European, African, or Asian—these scholars may help us decode previously unrecognized hybrid elements and their implications. They may help us unravel the nuances of code-switching or alert us when a local fable has been purposefully altered for its “New World” readers. The critical dialogue surrounding “American” literature thus becomes—as it should be—truly international.

What most appeals to me in this reformulation, however, is that it necessarily destabilizes easy assumptions about centers and margins in the construction of literary history. As I stated at the outset, the persistence of theories of continuity in the study of American literary history has repeatedly distorted its capacity to treat frontier texts as anything other than marginalia or cultural mythology, because the frontier is displaced always to the geographical edges, regarded as transitory, and its texts scoured for signs of hegemonic purposes or anxieties.¹⁶ Obsessed with its own myth of origins, the scholarship that comprises most literary histories is always seeking some defining beginning—usually Puritan New England, sometimes Virginia Plantation, in rare instances the European voyages of discovery—in whose texts may be discerned something peculiarly or characteristically “American”—American by current measure, of course.

But the limitations of this kind of literary history are obvious: The works produced are patently ahistorical, tacitly reading some version of the present back into the past. They are univocal and monolingual, defining origins by what later became the tropes of the dominant, or conquering language. And, by imputing “profound continuities between early American literary expression and the classic literature of the United States in the mid-nineteenth century,” they necessarily obscure any text that cannot be accommodated to whatever is currently accepted as the features of the mature national literary consciousness. It is notions like these, moreover, that give

¹⁶ Warren I. Susman illustrates this process succinctly in his examination of post-Turnerian intellectual debates over the meaning and import of the frontier in “The Frontier Thesis and the American Intellectual,” in his *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1973, 1984), pp. 27-38.

rise to “the concomitant belief in American ‘exceptionalism,’ both literary and cultural.”¹⁷ Furthermore, in terms of their adequacy to accommodate a literary history of discontinuous frontiers, these studies tend to characterize all productions outside of major urban cultural centers as *merely regional* and to underestimate the influence of place and physical environment on any writer’s construction of reality.

Having only recently marked the one hundredth anniversary of the official closing of the frontier in 1890, I am recommending that Americanist scholars reopen it, thematizing frontier as a multiplicity of ongoing first encounters over time and land, rather than a linear chronology of successive discoveries and discrete settlements. Noting the passionately contested meanings of the 1992 five hundredth anniversary of Columbus’ first landing, I am asking that Americanists once and for all eschew the myth of origins—with its habits of either fetishizing or marginalizing race, place, and ethnicity—and, by returning to serious study of the frontiers, adopt a model of literary history that privileges no group’s priority and no region’s primacy. In the frontier literary history I have projected here, there can be no primal landscape because there are so many borderlands, and even the same site, over time, may serve for seriatim first encounters. There can be no paradigmatic first contact because there are so many different kinds of first encounters. And there can be no single overarching story. The texts that attempt to delineate these frontier moments—like the literary histories generated to accommodate them—will tell many different stories. Indeed, the study of frontier literary history—like American literary history, in general—should properly be marked by endlessly proliferating, multiple, competing narrative designs. The singular identities and unswerving continuities that Americanists have regularly claimed for our literary history are no longer credible.

The scope of the project outlined here, however, will make many literary historians nervous because it appears to beg the question of “literariness.” In asking that we study Norse sagas and women’s travel diaries as assiduously as we study texts by James Fenimore Cooper and Willa Cather, I threaten to sustain the premise, always suspected by William Spengemann,

¹⁷ Philip F. Gura, “The Study of Colonial American Literature, 1966-1987: A Vade Mecum,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser. 45, 2 (1988): 309.

that American literature *is* “an altogether imaginary subject.” But only by opening up the question of literariness can we ever take on Spengemann’s “task of **reconstructing** the foundations on which our collective enterprise rests.”¹⁸ In elaborating a literary history of the frontiers, the challenge is not to decide *beforehand* what constitutes literariness but, rather, to expose ourselves to different kinds of texts and contexts so as to recover how they variously inscribe the stories of first contact. In that process, we will come to understand the many different ways that different kinds of texts can function as “literature” within varying cultural groups. And “literariness” will take on more densely contextualized meanings. Additionally, the interdisciplinary and multilingual skills required for such an undertaking will tend inevitably, in Cary Nelson’s words, to “destabilize distinctions between quality and historical relevance by making them self-conscious.”¹⁹

Finally, while I would not argue that a literary history of the frontiers could adequately account for the many literatures and literary forms produced in the United States (or in its precolonial past), I would suggest that such a project will radically alter both what we recognize as “literature” and how we define its historical processes. The literature of the frontiers may not be the only kind of literature produced in the Americas, but it is surely inherent in all the rest.

¹⁸ Spengemann, pp. 2, 3.

¹⁹ Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 41.

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(紀元文 譯)

摘要

際此距美國正式結束邊疆(一八九〇年)百周年僅僅五年之今日,本論文建議美國主義學者把邊疆的概念當做主題,並將邊疆概念視為對於時間與土地多重的持續性遭遇,而非繼續透過某一族群各別墾殖的直線式編年角度來觀察邊疆。文中提及一九九二年適值哥倫布首次登陸五百周年所引發的熱烈討論之意義,建議美國主義派文學學者應斷然迴避起源的神話,因其慣於盲目崇拜抑或邊陲化種族、地區與族群性。作者主張藉由徹底的研究邊疆,採取一種美國文學史模式,不偏倚某一群體與地域之優先。在這種新的典範中,邊疆文學史跟其他所有的美國文學表達方式一樣,均將呈現多語言與多元文化、多聲帶且具有中心的地位。