CHANGING LANDSCAPES: AMERICAN FRONTIER

MYTHOLOGY AND “PLACE-MAKING” IN

POPULAR WESTERN NARRATIVES

A Thesis

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Kylee Duran-Cox

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my loving husband, Alan, because I could never have done it without you. Thanks for proofing various drafts on tired evenings and every word of encouragement you gave me.

I also dedicate this thesis to my two sweet babies, Mia and Daphne, I love you girls so much. Thank you my loves!
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The purpose of this thesis is to explore the way that American narratives have used frontier mythology to make place, and to explore the way that the mythological past has shaped our present. Though critics of past generations like Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marks have made the idea of the frontier central to their respective arguments, they have presented a model wherein they view American writers in a particular static relationship to the frontier. On the other hand, I argue that the frontier myth is dynamic, shifting, and continually updating, and that it continues to affect the way Americans construct, consume, and interpret the physical and cultural landscape around them. Spanning the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, Francis Parkman’s *The Oregon Trail*, Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, and Joan Didion’s *Where I was From*, reveal that the
mythic urges of popular frontier literature often present a peculiar paradox and challenge in American place-making.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Frontier Mythology, Rebirth, and Place-Making in American Literature

This thesis examines three western narratives based in American frontier mythology in order to ask how myth-based narratives develop a uniquely American “sense of place.” These texts span from the frontier’s boom in the 1840’s, through its extinction, and finally, to its present place in history in order to examine how the frontier has functioned as a shifting cultural symbol within the American narrative. I argue that the mutability of the frontier myth has a significant impact on the way that we connect to places. The texts studied here include Francis Parkman’s The Oregon Trail, Ernest Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises, and Joan Didion’s Where I was From. Each work engages the frontier as a way to conceive of the author’s American identity and revise past representations of American place. From this standpoint, I will answer the following questions: how do the narrative settings in these works communicate a sense of place? What do these texts tell us about the way popular culture has adapted the frontier myth to interpret the physical and cultural landscape of their respective time periods? What are the implications of a frontier-based national myth?

Frontier myths in American literature have been prolific and changing, but arguably the most enduring mythic element in such literature has been rebirth. Though
the concept of rebirth is extant throughout humanity, this penchant for transformation is an ingrained American trope with direct ties to frontier mythology. In *Beyond the Frontier: Writers, Western Regionalism and a Sense of Place*, Harold P. Simonson defines the frontier myth thusly:

The myth proclaimed that on the open frontier a person could be reborn and have a second chance. Freed from the heavy accretions of culture, the frontiersman again could experience the pristine harmony between self and nature; or, to prove superiority, he again could battle nature’s inscrutable ways, and, through resourcefulness and strength, triumph over them. (2)

Simonson notes that frontier myths require an encounter with the landscape of a wild, unknown place.

The above passage evidences that frontier mythology was rooted in the notion that the frontier’s alien “wilderness” was the myth’s agent of rebirth because it represented the antithesis of civilization. The frontier became symbolic of a place where old cultural models could be thrown out; the current fashion of doing things rejected; a place where societal “rules” did not exist, and where even laws were thrown out. The frontier was the perfect symbol of democracy and freedom for American, a landscape offering a “blank” space upon which to inscribe a new way of life. The problematic nature of the frontier myth is evidenced by Frederick Jackson Turner, in *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* when he argues that the frontier wilderness “appealed to men as a fair, blank page on which to write a new chapter in the story of man’s struggle for a higher type of society (261).” For the “new chapter” in the culture to be written, previously established societies, places, and landscapes must be abandoned. In this example, Turner also shows that the impulse of the frontier narrator’s vision is to
transform the physical and cultural geography of the frontier from a “blank page” into a new Place.

But with the frontier’s closing, as Frederick Jackson Turner pointed out, the absence of physical frontier lands would potentially throw the possibility of cultural rebirth into doubt. If the entire frontier was to become settled into unique regions and places, where were individuals going to go to reject their bond to the cultural status quo? Without the “blank-slate” upon which to inscribe new cultural chapters, how was American civilization to renew itself? Turner’s theory in and of itself, would become myth. Yet, Turner’s probing raised an interesting cultural conundrum: since the democratic fecundity of the frontier would no longer be available, where would Americans satiate their appetite for cultural rejuvenation?

Americans would have to look elsewhere; and they did. The frontier’s subsequent absence left a thirst for rebirth in the cultural consciousness that at times would seem to override the desire for creating a cohesive American identity. Though popular American narratives of the west have often used the frontier myth to construct a unique sense of place within the larger world, they also reveal the myth’s tendency to undermine the establishment of place. Drawing upon phenomenological philosophy, Yi Fu Tuan, a geographer and proponent of geographical humanism defines place as “a center of meaning constructed by experience.” He avers that particular spaces (like the American frontier) become meaningful only when transformed through intimate first-person experience, a type of experience American frontier mythology usually discounted (Tuan, Place 152). Therefore, the way a place is perceived is often shaped by the way it is described. Tuan defines places as “centers of experience” which invests surroundings
with meaning that can only be attained through direct experience. Intimate first-person experience is the true way of place-making, averred by Tuan when he states that: “Sense of place is rarely acquired in passing. To know a place well requires long residence and deep involvement (Tuan, *Place* 164).” Spanning the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, Francis Parkman Jr.’s *The Oregon Trail*, Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* and Joan Didion’s *Where I Was From*, demonstrate that, if left unchecked, the very myth used to articulate a sense of American identity can undermine the principal requirements for establishing an enduring sense of place.

Francis Parkman Jr.’s, *The Oregon Trail*, surveys the frontier in its first heavy wave of immigration in 1846 during the time that the west was still in the process of becoming America. Indeed, far from vanishing, the west was radically expanding geographically within Parkman’s narrative and time: a fact revealed in his reading of the news of the outbreak of the war with Mexico as he draws his narrative to a close. The far west was being claimed for America in the bid for Manifest Destiny and quickly becoming a popular cultural symbol for a developing sense of national identity. Parkman’s text claims to be a narrative which is largely interested in the historic reportage of the frontier’s “primitive state” for posterity. In actuality, it is a text which asks larger questions about what it is to be American and what kind of culture America wishes to have spread throughout the lands they are to acquire. Parkman briefly leaves the comfort of his civilized culture behind him in order to seek new experience on the frontier so that he may narrate a landscape that will advance a revised, more useful and more American version of the frontier for his culture.
Ernest Hemingway’s expatriate novel, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), captures an important moment for American identity between the world wars. After closing the frontier, domestic expansion in America was now out of the question. America now directed her expansionist efforts overseas. World War I would earn America a commanding role on the world stage and legitimize its position as a global leader. Even so, some American writers began to turn away from past American generations which romanticized the nation’s cultural history. American literary colonies began to spring up throughout Europe, especially in Paris where Hemingway would write his first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*. Although Hemingway, too, tries to distances himself from popular American culture, his reveals a distinctly American impulse toward democratic transformation specific to frontier experience. While the narrative tries to claim independence from America’s current sense of “civilization” it also perpetuates its long established mythology of transformation in a frontier space and adapts the American frontier mythology for the new century.

Joan Didion traces the aftermath of myth and its impact on the American relationship to place and shows how American place-making is threatened by its own hunger for new horizons. In *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Didion writes that Americans now “drifted from city to torn city, sloughing off both the past and the future as snakes shed their skins, children who were never taught and would never now learn the games that had held society together” (67). Didion expands upon the idea that the frontier myth has attenuated the American culture and its relationship to place in her narrative *Where I was From*. Didion uses images of vanishing Californian landscapes to point out how the identities of Americans in the far west are in danger of being subsumed by rapid cultural
turnover and blotted out by modern convenience in the 21st century. While past mythic
frontier narratives often portray death as the beginning of a rebirth experience, Where I
was From, questions the soundness of this ritualistic transformation as being one inferior
for establishing lasting, cohesive cultural patterns of narrating American identity.

While the frontier myth has taken many different narrative forms,
nonetheless, it persists. Examining these popular western authors and narratives reveals
how the frontier myth is still embedded in the western American landscape and the
outcome of that mythology on the American character today. The scope of my interest in
this project is to answer the following questions: how do the narrative settings
communicate a sense of place? What do these texts tell us about the way popular culture
has adapted frontier mythology to interpret the physical and cultural landscape of
America? What are the implications of such a national myth?
CHAPTER II

NARRATING A NEW AMERICA:
RE-WRITING THE IDENTITY
OF THE AMERICAN
FRONTIER

Francis Parkman Jr.’s *The Oregon Trail*

In 1846, Francis Parkman Jr. decided to leave behind his Harvard studies and Beacon Hill upbringing in order to undertake a journey deep into the American frontier. Parkman describes the purpose of his journey as follows:

The journey which the following narrative describes was undertaken on the writer’s part with a view of studying the manners and character of Indians in their primitive state... in doing so he has constantly aimed to leave an impression of their character correct as far as it goes. *In justifying his claim to accuracy on this point, it is hardly necessary to advert to the representations given by poets and novelists, which, for the most part, are mere creations of fancy* [Emphasis mine]. The Indian is certainly entitled to a high rank among savages, but his good qualities are not those of an Uncas or an Outalissi.

The sketches were originally published in the *Knickerbocker Magazine*, commencing in February, 1847. (33)

What Parkman experienced in the frontier caused him to realize that there needed to be a revision in frontier literature. Parkman’s authorial prologue to the 1849 edition of *The Oregon Trail* clearly articulates his text’s divergence from the frontier literature popular in the American and European marketplace. This prologue suggests James Fennimore Cooper’s novels were inauthentic representations of the frontier. In the very next sentence,
the author concludes his prologue by advertising *The Oregon Trail*’s original publication in New York’s *Knickerbocker Magazine*. In doing so, Parkman appeals to the same “highbrow” New York audience who would be familiar with Cooper’s novels and sets up *The Oregon Trail*’s attempt to change the standards of America’s literary taste in frontier literature. Parkman’s prologue cleverly disguises the text’s attempt to deconstruct past representations of the frontier by appealing to mass audiences with promises of an “authentic” portrayal of the Native Americans. The Native American people comprise a vital part of Parkman’s valuation of the western landscape. Nevertheless, in *The Oregon Trail* Parkman was primarily interested creating “authentic” American frontier literature by remaking the vision of the frontier as a place which embodied a new American tradition. In so doing, he was attempting to articulate new standards for being an American.

Though the success of the American Revolution in 1776 freed America from British rule, Parkman realized that America’s literary and cultural independence had yet to be won. America’s origins as a disparate collection of Dutch, French, and English colonies had rendered American culture indebted to a European heritage from the nation’s beginning, rejecting the cultural influence of the Native American population indigenous to the continent. Preferences for Europeanized modes of art and philosophy seemed to diminish the cultural relevance of the American west. The *Literary History of the American West* states: “Dieting on British books and on reviews of British books naturally turned the western mind eastward for literary inspiration and critical direction… Hinterland readers who would not support American literary journals nevertheless passed around dog-eared copies of Scott and Byron (1286).”
Parkman’s privileged upbringing as a Bostonian Brahman gave him an acute awareness of the widespread perception of European superiority in arts and letters that had infiltrated the east and culturally subordinated the reality of the western frontier. Parkman himself was thoroughly acquainted with European literature. *The Oregon Trail* abounds in literary allusions to such literature, beginning numerous chapters with Byronic epigraphs. Although Parkman respected Europe’s cultural richness, he realized that as his nation developed, the sense of place for American frontier literature was being imported. The dominant vision of America’s western frontier was coming from a literary viewpoint that was self consciously injected with the sensibilities au currant in European literature which he perceived as not at all representative of the frontier’s Wild West.

*The Oregon Trail* is a great piece of writing from America’s frontier before the west was claimed for the United States, and provides one with a glimpse of the manifestation of frontier mythology in popular American culture. The book was wildly popular during the author’s time, and Parkman’s training as a historian gave him special insight into conceptualizing the frontier as a dynamic region with historic socio-political implications. Because Parkman was a historian by vocation, he intuited that America’s relationship to the frontier meant great cultural changes were at hand. The Louisiana Purchase and, subsequently the expedition of Lewis and Clark in 1804 had only recently opened the west to further exploration and settlement. The United States had recently annexed Texas in 1845, and Parkman’s encounter with Colonel Kearny’s in the narrative shows that the Mexican American War was the beginning of America’s western migration. When Parkman published his 1849 edition of *The Oregon Trail*, the Gold Rush had just exploded in California and Oregon. Suddenly, Americans were riveted by
America’s western frontier. Manifest Destiny was about to grab hold of the frontier; and as the American nation prepared to move westward, Parkman saw the opportunity for American literary expansionism.

To keep up with and record the frontier’s rapid changes, Parkman embarked on a journey. He was singularly focused on capturing an authentic vision of America’s frontier in order to give it a unique sense of place. To do this, he had to first extricate himself from “civilized” culture. In chapter one, “The Frontier,” Parkman prepares to “jump off” from the last vestiges of civilization and American soil in Independence, Missouri, to enter the frontier:

[Independence] was crowded. A multitude of shops had sprung up to furnish the emigrants and Santa Fe traders with necessaries for their journey; and there was an incessant hammering and banging from a dozen blacksmiths’ sheds, where the heavy wagons were being repaired, and the horses and oxen shod. The streets were thronged with men, horses, and mules. While I was in the town, a train of emigrant wagons from Illinois passed through, to join the camp on the prairie, and stopped in the principal street. A multitude of healthy children’s faces were peeping out from under the cover of wagons. Here and there a buxom damsel was seated on horseback, holding over her sunburnt face an old umbrella or parasol, once gaudy enough, but now miserably faded. (42)

Though Parkman entitles his first chapter “The Frontier,” this is not yet the frontier. Even though Independence is nothing like the privileged surrounding of Parkman’s upper-class Boston background, in Independence, there are still streets and “throngs” of people; thriving business establishments; families; and even “damsels,” all which represent aspects of the New England culture he leaves behind. This bustling frontier town in Missouri is not “The Frontier” but the frontier line- a liminal space which marked the jumping point off from the boundaries of civilization into unknown.
Parkman initially finds that extricating himself from his culture was easier imagined than done. The narrator prepares to begin his excursion, setting out from the Independence, Missouri with his cousin, Quincy Adams Shaw. While being outfitted in town, they meet “Captain C. of the British army, who, with his brother, and Mr. R. an English gentlemen, was bound on a hunting expedition across the continent” (Parkman 41). Parkman and Shaw’s prestigious positions as highly educated and wealthy Bostonians allow them to join forces with the Brits and unite their separate expeditions, adopting the critical frontier traveling strategy that favored safety in numbers. At this crucial narrative moment, the entry point to the frontier, the narrative alliance between American and British characters compromises the narrative’s search for the authentic American frontier because immediately after joining forces with the British, things begin to go awry:

The captain had returned to give us notice that R., who assumed the direction of his party, had determined upon another route from that agreed upon between us; and instead of taking the course of the traders, to pass northward by Fort Leavenworth, and follow the path marked out by the dragoons in their expedition of last summer. To adopt such a plan without consulting us, we looked upon as a very high-handed proceeding… (Parkman 45)

Although the narrator has immediately recreated affiliations with his cultural heritage, he also indicates that he quickly becomes disenchanted with the alliance; Parkman’s preference was to follow the trader’s route – traders being the epitomes of authentic frontiersmen- while the English prefer a newly established military government route which had no affiliation to Parkman’s sensibility of authentic frontier experience. This example is evidence of the fundamental differences in the way the British and the American groups view the frontier which suggests that the British way of navigating the
frontier is as ill-suited to the narrative’s purpose, as are English literary models for American literature.

As the two parties continue on their way through the frontier, Mr. R. continues to attempt to control the group’s course of actions despite the fact that as a British gentleman he ostensibly knows the least about survival in the frontier wilderness. After progressing under the direction of Mr. R., the group finds itself lost for the second time under his direction, and once again off course. And yet, because of his status as gentleman, Mr. R. continually flouts the wishes of the larger group that might better serve the direction of the parties:

His energy was much more conspicuous than his wisdom; but his predominant characteristic was a magnanimous ambition to exercise on all occasions an awful rule and supremacy, and this propensity equally displayed itself, as the reader will have observed, whether the matter in question was the baking of a hoe-cake or a point of international law. (Parkman 91)

The text makes clear that the frontier is no place for the refined culture that was self consciously budding in New England. Refined culture clearly has little value in the frontier, and as Mr. R’s incompetence at navigating shows, it can even be a liability.

The narrator’s point of view is compromised when the British vision begins to steer the narrative and the course of the narrative journey through the characters of Mr. R and the Captain. Because Parkman’s intention is to represent the frontier from an authentically American first person point of view, his observation demands narrative freedom. If it is directly controlled by outside forces, the American point of view becomes tainted. Parkman’s narrative viewpoint is unable to assert itself because the old pattern of European dominance and superiority is again asserting its presence in the narrative.
These brief anecdotes play an important part of the narrative’s allegorical development of the frontier as an American place and claiming it as such. The interplay between English and American subjects denotes the long-troubled relationship between England and America and presents several historical parallels between English and American political relations. Just as America’s connections to English rule in America eroded and became contentious over time, so too does the relationship between Parkman’s group and the European travelers. Similarly, both situations ultimately lead to a severing of ties with the English on the part of the Americans in favor of American independence. Parkman emphasizes the facts that democratic forms of decision making between the two traveling groups is ultimately rejected by the British members even though it would be a more advantageous strategy for maintaining group unity and therefore, navigating.

It is the struggle to control the American frontier lands that ultimately divides British and American relations. In microcosm, these actions are analogous to the actions that spurred the America’s Declaration of Independence from England only seventy years before Parkman’s journey, and provide striking similarities to the characteristics of the groups’ respective countries as the journey wears on. When *The Oregon Trail* was written, both America and England were vying for control of the frontier and endeavored to claim unsettled territories as their own. Harvard historian Bernard DeVoto notes that there were “conflicting British and American claims to the lands between [agreed upon boundaries] and west of the continental divide that had not been settled” and notes that America’s attempt to claim unsettled western territories was solidified by the election of President J. Polk on an expansionist platform which promised Americans “all of Oregon”
(Devoto 23). And, indeed the threat that Mexico might settle its war debt to England by giving her California was a factor is precipitating the Mexican-American War.

A turning point comes with the narrative’s severing of the American/British affiliation. The struggle for American sovereignty is what ultimately divides the two groups. As the narrative anticipates the breakup, Parkman selects concepts and language that reminiscent of America’s *Declaration of Independence*. This is evidenced during the final straw, by the announcement that, after “finding our wishes systematically disregarded, we took the direction of affairs into our own hands” (Parkman 134). Like the Founding Fathers, the narrator is poised to demand narrative freedom for himself, in order to direct his own course and thus, the course of the narrative. Leaving the British behind becomes a significant stand for autonomy. Now, instead of relying upon safety in numbers, Parkman’s party will rely upon its own resources and leadership to guide them through the unknown territory. In essence, Parkman’s group makes their own declaration of independence.

Comparing the language of Parkman’s complaints to that of the Declaration of Independence shows striking similarities. For example, the “high handedness,” of the British inclinations toward an “awful rule and supremacy” which “systematically disregard” American’s wishes are all strikingly similar to that of the Declaration of Independence: “In every Stage of these Oppressions we have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble Terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated Injury…a Tyrant, is unfit to be the Ruler of a free People” (Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution: the Texts). Though Parkman’s language is terser than that of the Declaration of Independence, the concepts and actions are the same.
After parting ways with the British, the narrative can freely begin an American journey represented by a more authentic American experience. After this independence is declared, Parkman comes upon a patch of flowers whose colors symbolize that of the American flag: “…their texture was frail and delicate, and their colors extremely rich: pure white, dark blue, and a transparent crimson” (Parkman135). The image of the red, white and blue flowers symbolizes the possibility for the frontier to become an authentically American space. By leaving the British behind, Parkman is finally able to narrate the frontier from an independent viewpoint, and one that can become more American because it is less controlled by outside forces. These red, white and blue flowers serve to reinforce the image of the frontier as a potentially democratic setting and auspiciously mark the true beginning of Parkman’s American frontier journey. Mimicking the colors of the American flag in the flowers in the landscape creates a sense that the frontier landscape is naturally an American place.

The narrative’s preoccupation with establishing independence reflects the questions regarding an “American” national identity which proliferated during Parkman’s time. Since the first European settlements in America, the world had asked: what was “the meaning of this society in the wilderness (Banner 31)?” What was America, and what was “American”? For a country in its formative stages of sovereignty and freedom, these questions were perplexing. America’s relatively newfound independence had created a climate of national self reflection:

It was widely assumed that America’s primary task was the justification of its newly won freedom. This entailed more than building a flourishing economy or even a stable government. Creation of a distinctive culture was thought to be the mark of true nationhood. (Nash 68)
Parkman’s text believes that “distinctive culture” can be regained by accessing land outside of the old colonies – land to be claimed by the new nation.

Parkman’s text serves as an example of America literary nationalism which gained popularity in the 19th century for expressing a sense of national pride. Though Parkman values the American landscape, the frontier is Parkman’s metaphor for the cultural wilderness facing America in the nineteenth century. The mark of true nationhood and a distinctive culture is exactly what Parkman is trying to achieve by Americanizing the frontier. Parkman uses the wilderness landscape to set the American frontier apart from its previous depictions in popular culture. In *The Oregon Trail*, the frontier wilderness is the antithesis of east coast civilization. It is a vast and imposing landscape that bears no resemblance to the previous frontier landscapes familiar to Parkman’s *Knickerbocker* readers. In the narrative, the landscape dominates the narrator’s vision. Parkman’s narrative details the frontier’s pristine natural landscape and its vast domination over his frontier party:

. . . we looked down on the wild bottoms of Laramie Creek, which far below us wound like a writhing snake from side to side of the narrow interval, amid a growth of scattered cotton-wood and ash trees. Lines of tall cliffs, white as chalk, shut in this green strip of woods and meadow-land…On our left was a barren prairie, stretching to the horizon; on our right, a deep gulf, with Laramie Creek at the bottom. We found ourselves at length at the edge of a steep descent; a narrow valley, with long rank grass and scattered trees stretching before us for a mile or more along the course of the stream. Reaching the father end, we stopped and encamped. An old huge cotton-wood tree spread its branches horizontally over our tent. Laramie Creek, circling before our camp, half inclosed (sic) us; it swept along the bottom of a line of tall white cliffs that looked down on us from the farther bank. There were dense copses on our right; the cliffs, too, were half hidden by shrubbery, though behind us a few cotton-wood trees, dotting the green prairie, alone impeded the view, and friend or enemy could be discerned at a mile’s distance. (172)
In this passage, all vestiges of culture are erased from the landscape. Here, Parkman gives the landscape grand scope while the narrator and his party are small and insignificant. All adjectives which describe the wilderness are large and impressive: a “huge” old cottonwood tree, the “barren prairie stretching to the horizon,” the “wild” bottoms of Laramie Creek.” In one paragraph, the narrator passes through innumerable kinds of landscapes, all large and imposing. The narrator shows that the frontiersmen are virtually swallowed up by the vast, unending landscape.

This stark and expansive landscape is entirely different than Europeanized versions. The text is truly an American pastoral romance described by frontier critic Leo Marx as a narrative that is

. . . played out in some variant of symbolic setting. The action is set in motion by a pastoral impulse – the protagonist’s familiar urge, in the face of the established order’s growing complexity and power, to get away… The pastoral figure retreats from this alienating situation to a terrain marked by fewer signs of human intervention. (490)

This mode is precisely the tradition that Parkman falls under by setting up the frontier landscape as a testing ground of physical and mental virility independent of old cultural constraints to come understand his culture and place within it on his own terms.

Parkman’s expansive visions of frontier landscape give an authentic “sense of place” to the American frontier. Even the pastoral visions that the narrative demonstrate how vastly different the landscape of the frontier actually is. Parkman addresses his readership outright to stay away from the frontier’s pristine landscape because it poses hardships unsuited for those with “upper crust” cultural sensibilities:

Should any one of my readers ever be impelled to visit the prairies… I can assure him that he need not think to enter at once upon the paradise of his imagination… The intervening county, the wide and fertile belt that extends for several hundred
miles beyond the extreme frontier, will probably answer tolerably well to his
preconceived ideas of the prairie; for this it is from which picturesque tourists,
painters, poets and novelists, who have seldom penetrated farther, have derived
their conceptions of the whole region. … Let him be as enthusiastic as he may, he
will find much to damp his ardor. His wagons will stick in the mud; his horses will
break loose; harness will give way, and axel-trees prove unsound. His bed will be a
soft one, often consisting of black mud, of the richest consistency. As for food, he
must content himself with biscuit and salt provisions; for strange as it may seem,
this tract of country produces very little game. (Parkman 69)

Parkman makes clear that the true frontier is a harsh landscape that bears no reminiscence
to the past romantic visions of the frontier known to Parkman’s readers. Parkman
pointedly rejects the style of European romanticism for describing the frontier landscape,
and uses the text’s Byronic epigraph’s to contrast Parkman’s prose in *The Oregon Trail*.
Parkman’s stark, unromantic prose lends a sobering view that undermines the vision of
the frontier’s prairie lands as an American Eden or pastoral oasis. Parkman’s prose
refreshes depictions of the frontier and save it from the banal, Europeanized literary
models which America so often sought to copy.

Parkman’s text emphasized the fact that frontier wilderness was a uniquely
American subject which had no European equivalent. The surrounding landscape reflects
a comparison between the west and the Old World. As Parkman struggles through the
mountains, straining for the summit, the narrator takes a brief moment to imagine the
landscape of Europe as the antithesis to the vast unmarked territory that surrounds him in
the frontier:

In that perilous wilderness, eight hundred miles removed beyond the faintest
vestige of civilization, the scenes of another hemisphere, the seat of ancient
refinement passed before me, more like a succession of vivid paintings than any
mere dreams of fancy. I saw the Church of St. Peter’s illumined on the evening
Easter-Day, the whole majestic pile from the cross to the foundationstone, penciled
in fire, and shedding a radiance, like the serene light of the moon, on the sea of
upturned faces below. I saw...the melancholy Coliseum and the crumbling ruins of
the Eternal City. (Parkman 339)

While Europe may be the “seat of ancient refinement,” this passage shows that the
landscapes of Europe have become relics which have been overtaken by civilized culture.
The beauty of the European landscape is in its associations with the past. Although
Europe’s past is imagined to be magnificently grand it is also filled with a fading light
that begins in “fire,” and “radiance” but then dimly fades into “the serene light of the
moon.” With this, the narrator evokes a sense of finality, a past that however glorious
cannot achieve the glory that it once held and the belief that European influence over the
rest of the world will never be as powerful as it had once been.

Clearly, the landscape Parkman experienced was a place radically different
from past literary traditions. Though New England dismisses the frontier as being
culturally unrefined, The Oregon Trail works to emphasize the frontier’s cultural
legitimacy. The hostility of the natural wilderness allows for a new “breed” of
Americans, like Saraphin. By trade a trapper, Saraphin has both feet frozen off yet still
manages to frolic about camp on his two stumps of feet. And despite being kicked in the
chest by his horse and “severely injured,” Saraphin continues:

. . . with the undaunted mettle of New England, from which part of the country he
had come, he continued to follow his perilous occupation. To some of the children
of cities it may seems strange, that men with no object in view should continue to
follow such life of hardship and desperate adventure, yet there is a mysterious,
resistless charm [emphasis mine] in the basilisk eye of danger and few men perhaps
remain long in that wild region without learning to love peril for its own sake, and
to laugh carelessly in the face of death. (Parkman 305)

This is a vision of Parkman’s real American frontier: a trapper. The “resistless charm” of
old Stumpy evidences the narrative’s revaluing of the frontier as a place that demands an
“undaunted mettle” reminiscent of New England’s first settlers, and Parkman’s forbearers, the pilgrims.

The narrator suggests that while the frontier may be dismisses as unrefined, it allows for new forms of culture to emerge that can establish new values and traditions. In *Errand into the Wilderness*, Perry Miller posits that the frontier made this process of American evolution possible and “that a basic conditioning factor was the frontier— the wilderness… [and] unless we acknowledge the existence of the forest the character of American history is obscure” (Banner 23). The antipode to wilderness, civilization, required complex social systems that dictated the way of life and guided the character of these social bodies. Without these systems in place, individuals were forced to create their own values, way of life and identity, just as the nation was, out from under England’s watchful eye. In an editorial prologue to Miller’s essay, it is averred that Miller finds the,

‘American way’ lies ‘in the jeremiad, and with it, the way to ‘Americanization.’
Thus emerged a characteristically American… trait of invoking the past in order to justify, and indeed to make possible, what appear to be radical departures in politics and society. (Banner 23)

For Parkman, the frontier’s austere landscape doesn’t lack culture; it simply forms a new brand of culture brought about by the profoundly new experience confronted by frontiersmen in a place is that it has no “civilizing” constraints impeding it.

The narrative stresses that the frontier wilderness is the antithesis of “refined” civilization but, like Miller, suggests that this “lack” of culture is valuable to establishing new cultural identity. Though the frontier was often written about within a tradition of European Romanticism which exalted nature as innately refining, Parkman scoffs several
times at the idea that incidental contact with the frontier wilderness makes better men:

“One traveling in this country seldom has leisure to think of anything but the stern features of the scenery and its accompaniments, or the practical details of each day’s journey. Like them, he and his thoughts grow hard and rough” (Parkman 135). The conception of frontier space in *The Oregon Trail* rejects the idea that the space is innately meliorating and instead embraces self sufficiency and endurance over cultural refinement. It’s not the beauty of the frontier wilderness that is important but the challenges that the frontier presents to an individual’s survival. The frontier is a valuable place because the onus is on the each individual to rise to the challenges that the wilderness presents for their own survival, thus weeding out the impuissant that may otherwise hide behind the façade of genteel polish. By mythologizing the austerity of the western frontier, the narrative changes the widely held conception of frontier and the perception of its value to America.

Parkman presents the “real” frontier landscape as a place that is hard, even brutal. He wants to prove to his readers that frontier culture is just as relevant as the culture from he and his readers come from. Devoid of established structure, convention, or any previous models upon which to map the way, America’s “wilderness” state is precisely what the narrator values most because it is inherently democratic. Parkman ultimately views the wilderness as testing ground which mentally and physically assesses an individual’s character based on ability alone. This frontier wilderness shouldn’t be viewed as culturally substandard when it is a place where:

... each man lives by the strength of his arm and the valor of his heart. Here society is reduced to its original elements, the whole fabric of art and conventionality is
struck rudely to pieces, and men find themselves suddenly brought back to the
wants and resources of their original natures. (Parkman 106)

In this passage, Parkman evidences the fact that he recognizes the frontier as an
independent place with its own identity.

The sense of place that Parkman’s frontier evokes in *The Oregon Trail* is one
of life and death. To navigate the frontier authentically, Parkman shows that one must be
willing to abandon the safeness of civilization and the safety net of previous experience
and knowledge. The narrator wants the readers to know that there is no cultural
intermediary to rely on in the frontier, and, for instance, when dysentery strikes Parkman
this becomes astonishingly clear. The sheer hostility between the wilderness environment
and the individual within in threatens to extinguish identity at every point for the narrator.

While looking for the Sioux tribe and becoming lost, Parkman’s clearly envisions a
hostile landscape that may take his life:

. . . surrounded by tall bare hills, overspread from top to bottom with prickly-pears
and other cacti, that seemed like clinging reptiles. A plain, flat and hard, and with
scarcely the vestige of grass, lay before us, and a line of tall misshapen trees” and
confronted with “…a vast unbroken desert stretching away before us league upon
league, without bush or tree or anything that had life. (220-221)

This sight dismays Parkman severely. Faced with a barren and hostile landscape in the
face of his increasingly excruciating dysentery, Parkman knows that he may not make it
out of the frontier alive. Even so, the narrator “resolved that I would not under any
circumstances attempt to leave the country until my object was completely gained”
(Parkman 221).

Facing such a brutal landscape changes the nature of Parkman’s character. His
resolve to triumph over the hostile frontier landscape in order to find the Sioux reveals
the narrator’s willingness to die on the frontier. The narrator, who had at the outset, began upon a trip of “amusement,” shows that he is now tougher and harder than when he set out. This bout of dysentery seems to mark the death of Parkman’s Boston Brahmin identity and mark the birth of his truly American identity. By choosing to remain in the frontier wilderness until his “object is completely gained,” Parkman aligns himself with the undaunted mettle of Saraphin the trapper and not the blue blooded sport hunters like the Captain and Mr. R. who only stay long enough to collect their hunting trophies. The narrator’s old identity is abandoned in favor of facing death and imbedding himself with “one of the wildest of wild hordes that roam over the remote prairies” and thus becoming, for the narrative’s sake a true frontiersman. The demands of the frontier landscape have engendered the death of the old narrator.

The American frontier becomes a place of rebirth for Parkman. After living amongst the Sioux for several weeks the narrator’s rebirth in the wilderness is complete: “‘Am I,’ I thought to myself, ‘the same man who, a few months since, was seated, a quiet student of belles-letters, in a cushioned armchair by a sea-coal fire?’” (Parkman 234). He is not; for as the narrative comes to a close Parkman’s wilderness transformation is revealed to be profound and life altering:

We had seen life under a new aspect; the human biped had been reduced to his primitive condition. We had lived without law to protect, a roof to shelter, or garment of cloth to cover us. One of us at least had been without bread, and without salt to season his food. Our idea of what is indispensable to human existence and enjoyment had been wonderfully curtailed, and a horse, a rifle, and a knife seemed to make up the whole of life’s necessaries. For these once obtained, together with the skill to use them, all else that is essential would follow in their train, and a host of luxuries besides. One other lesson our short prairie experience had taught us; that of profound contentment in the present, and utter contempt for what the future might bring forth. These principals established, we prepared to leave Fort Laramie. (355)
Only after the narrator has undergone a radical change in his values and character can his wilderness experience—and the narrative—come to fruition. Parkman proves that on the American frontier life can be seen under a “new aspect,” and thus cements the frontier as an American symbol of cultural rebirth.

The contrast between the Parkman’s frontier landscape and his portrayal of the settled frontier lands show a marked contrast between wild land and settled land. As Parkman’s journey turns homeward, he writes that “From this time forward the character of the country was changing every day” (Parkman 456). As the party leaves the frontier land they leave behind them “the great arid deserts” and the brutality of the hostile landscape which had toughened Parkman. As they approach settled country, the landscape becomes more florid:

The forests that border Missouri soon rose before us, and we entered the wide tract of shrubbery which forms their outskirts. We had passed the same road on our outward journey in the spring, but its aspect was totally changed. The young wild apple-trees, then flushed with their fragrant blossoms, were now hung thickly with ruddy fruit. Tall grass flourished by the roadside in the place of tender shoots just peeping out from the warm and oozy soil. The vines were laden with dark purple grapes… now hung on gorgeous display… On every side we saw the tokens of maturity and decay where all before had been fresh and beautiful. (Parkman 459)

This passage shows the settled land as fecund, bursting with abundance. The ripening fruit denotes the domestication of the countryside and the promise of nourishment. A well traveled road leads Parkman’s party into the safety of the settlements and the comfort of civilization. Yet, even when beholding the comfort of the settlements, Parkman laments the loss of the “fresh and beautiful” place from whence they came.
Obviously, the frontier landscape that Parkman has painted for us is not beautiful in the classic sense, but is defined by him as beautiful because it appears so distinct from other landscapes. Parkman’s “sense of place” for the frontier is one which is the antipode to civilization and “home.” The frontier is contrasted to the landscape of the settlements yet it is still, for Parkman, beautiful. The concept of home is usually valued as a place of comfort and intimacy, but for Parkman, it is the Otherness of the wild, frontier landscape which he values so highly. Parkman depicts the frontier land as antithetical to home, and the implied meaning of “home.” Cultural geographer Yi Fu Tuan, defines a place as a “center of meaning constructed by experience,” and points out that homes are special places constructed by a web of intimate experiences (Place 152-153). Homes are especially full of meaning, because they are experienced more often and more intimately than other places. For Parkman, the frontier is a place which provides new experience, as opposed to intimate, experience. Parkman’s “fresh and beautiful” frontier landscape highlights profoundly new experience outside the boundaries of his old identity and provides him with a feeling of “Otherness.”

Parkman revalues the frontier as a dynamic place capable of creating profoundly new experience for America. As a historian, Parkman knows that while other cultures have a homeland, America does not because it was made up of immigrants. The American landscape is not even fully settled by Americans yet, but Parkman shows how it can be highly valuable. His narrative connotes the frontier with a sense of cultural rejuvenation and a place of cultural freedom. Claiming the frontier as a place of anti-culture suggests a sense of place for America that favors an anti-establishment mentality that will forge a new culture out of new experience. Parkman’s narrative shows that the
frontier’s defining trait is one that is opposed to tradition and instead favors radical
transformations. This makes Parkman’s frontier a place that symbolizes America’s
cultural freedom and affinity for transformation, an example of the American frontier
myth in action.

*The Oregon Trail* anticipates American historian Frederick Jackson’s
Turner’s “frontier thesis” in which Turner averred that the western frontier made the
American character. In *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, Turner
states that:

> American social development has been continually beginning over again on the
> frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion
> westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of
> primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. (3)

Turner’s assertion precisely articulates the sensibility of Francis Parkman’s
portrayal of the American frontier and its place in America. *The Oregon Trial* uses the
setting of the frontier to establish a new American tradition for frontier literature, one free
from the taint of European romanticism and its contemporary derivatives – especially
Cooper. Though Parkman vows to keep his vision of the frontier beholden to a sense of
authenticity and realism, *The Oregon Trail* also mythologizes American frontier
landscape by casting the frontier as a symbol of American nationalism. By emphasizing
the role of the frontier as a place with the potential to form a uniquely American
character, Parkman mythologizes the frontier as a symbol representative of “authentic”
American identity. *The Oregon Trail* suggests that like its expansive geography, America
demands equally expansive cultural horizons made accessible by the potential for a
rebirth experience in the wilderness of America’s frontier. The mythical transcendence
from the constraints of established culture seemingly offered by the frontier reveals Parkman’s brand of Americanism that would later become a recurring motif in frontier literature and the articulation of American identity.

The magic and beauty of Parkman’s frontier landscape is that it is still undisturbed. Ultimately however, even Parkman knows narrating a mythologized American frontier risks becoming an unsustainable way of articulating American identity. Because the frontierland is finite, Parkman knows that settlement will change the frontier forever and that his landscapes will eventually become extinct:

Great changes are at hand in that region. With the stream of emigration to Oregon and California, the buffalo will dwindle away, and the large wandering communities who depend on them for support must be broken and scattered. The Indians will soon be corrupted by the example of the whites, abased by whites, abased whiskey and overawed by military posts; so that within a few years the traveler may pass in tolerable security through their country. Its danger and charm will have disappeared together. (252)

Once settled, the landscape that has become a symbol for cultural freedom will no longer be as accessible. Parkman’s comments about these “great changes” such as these anticipates the sentiments of Frederick Jackson Turner whom would suggest that with the disappearance of the frontier would close a fundamental chapter of American history that articulated a unique sense of place for Americans. After settlement, a new culture would establish itself which would again struggle to face a crisis of American identity, but this time without the benefit of a pristine landscape upon which to inscribe its shifting sense of culture.
CHAPTER III

“NEW” HORIZONS: PATTERNS OF AMERICAN FRONTIER MYTH

Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*

Less than fifty years after Parkman had visited the America’s western frontier, it had vanished. At the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago, Frederick Jackson Turner’s would present his influential “frontier thesis” arguing that American democracy was a direct product of the American frontier experience. Turner’s *Significance of the Frontier in American History* recognized that the 1890 Census’s official declaration that the American frontier was closed marked the end of a “great historic movement” and the death of the place which had served to articulate a distinctive national character (1). The closing of the American frontier left a void in the fabric of the American landscape and, as Turner pointed out in his frontier thesis, in the fabric of American culture. While America’s western landscape had once symbolized the embodiment of freedom and democracy, it was now home to all who had flocked to settle there.

When Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* was published 1926, the frontier no longer seemed available for articulating a sense of place for America, because, as Tuan argues:

Space, not place, tantalized Americans when the frontiers were open and resources appeared limitless. Space is abstract. It lacks content; it is broad, open, and empty,
inviting the imagination to fill with substance and illusion; it is possibility and beckoning future. (Place 165)

Though the landscape of the American frontier was made up of individual places, these places were easily overlooked because the frontier myth absorbed the frontier as a mythic space that would eventually make America its own unique place. While frontier’s wild landscape had once symbolized the embodiment of freedom and “beckoning future” it was now a homeland no longer wild.

This shift in the sense of place for America was strongly felt by a new generation dubbed by Gertrude Stein as the “lost generation,” a group of American expatriates who flocked to Paris and other parts of Europe between WWI and the Great Depression. The war had strengthened America’s place on the world stage and made Europe available to reverse cultural colonization. The fin de siècle marked the transition from the nineteenth century into the twentieth, and ushered in the “modern” age, when the invention of modern conveniences such as the electricity, the car, the phone, was dramatically changing the way life was lived in America and around the world.

Modernism swept the European art world, redefining the boundaries of art, literature, music. The cultural affects are described by Margot Norris in “Modernist Eruptions (1988): “Generally committed to a national literature as free as possible of British influence, American artists responded in a variety of ways to the lure of modern European culture” (Norris 311). An exodus of American authors created a burgeoning artistic colony. Later, many of writers would become literary legends of their time, such as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, John Dos Passos, Gertrude Stein, and Hemingway.
Though Hemingway biographer Jeffery Meyers insists that Hemingway was not a “deracinated exile,” he does admit that Hemingway sought out new experience in Europe and appreciated the climate of literary experimentalism (Meyers 63). When Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* was published, it soon became the quintessential novel for the Lost Generation. Malcolm Cowley asserts: “It was a good novel and became a craze- young men tried to get as imperturbably drunk as the hero, young women of good families took a succession of lovers in the same heartbroken fashion as the heroine, they all talked like Hemingway characters” (Cowley, *Exile’s* 3). Cowley’s observation underscores *The Sun Also Rises* as an archetypal novel for the ‘lost” generation, but the book appealed to broader circles as well. Hemingway’s quasi-autobiographical novel following American exiles around Europe would earn him a respected reputation as a legitimate American author with modernist sensibilities and establish his popularity within the reading public.

The novel is conceived in the expatriate tradition which sought broad new cultural horizons in order to explode America’s traditional values and boundaries, yet *The Sun Also Rises* provides evidence that the frontier myth persisted in the impulses of American literary consciousness. Although *The Sun Also Rises* is often categorized as a novel that portrays itself as generational counter movement to mainstream Americanism, it in fact perpetuates well established literary traditions of American frontier mythology. While *The Sun Also Rises* appears to move further and further away from an American sense of place during the progress of the narrative, the text in fact relies upon a pattern deeply rooted in American frontier mythology and national consciousness.
Publishing his first novel in Paris established Hemingway as an “American” voice speaking from outside the borders of America. The American setting and sense of place is abandoned in favor of what Cowley asserts as “an artistic theory which held that the creative artist was “absolutely independent of all localities, nations, or classes.” It was a democratic spirit which fostered creativity, yet biographer Jeffery Meyers states that Hemingway “…remained American, wanted to write American prose, and in his early years, learn from American authors” (63). This focus on maintaining an American identity while simultaneously distancing himself from his homeland reveal Hemingway’s fractured sense of place and an underlying desire to superimpose the “American” frontier model on Europe the way that the Europeans and British had in America during Parkman’s generation.

Although he lived in exile from America, Hemingway denied being lost culturally and artistically. Hemingway uses his semi-autobiographical novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, to refute Gertrude Stein’s assertion that his is a “lost” generation. Two quotations comprise the novel’s epigram. One is Stein’s quote, “You are all a lost generation;” the other, a passage from Ecclesiastes, selected by Hemingway, which begins: “One generation passeth away, and another cometh...” (*Sun* 7). This vision of cyclical rebirth clearly states Hemingway’s intent to usher in the new generation. Further evidence of Hemingway’s claim for generational rebirth comes when he adds that, “The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down,” insinuating that he is on the upswing of the generational cycles while Stein’s generation is on the decline. The famous literary feud between Hemingway and Stein also indicates that Hemingway seeks to prove her
criticism of his generation wrong with his novel. By framing the novel with a denial of being lost, the author suggests a sense of place for his generation.

Like generations of American frontiersmen before him, Hemingway looked to a place outside his own nation and “civilization” for inspiration. In the typical frontier myth tradition, Hemingway leaves the landscape and culture of his homeland behind him in order to confront new experience. Hemingway’s novel mirrors this model. It is the tale of Jake Barnes, an American expatriate and WWI war veteran. Like Hemingway, Jake Barnes is an American journalist and writer in Paris. Both were wounded in the war, but Jake Barnes has been severely wounded, castrated or in some way rendered sexually impotent. Hemingway’s narrator must learn how to live anew, without the standard guides of experience and without the possibility of a conventional American life.

This self imposed exile brings Jake face to face with the cultural unknown that exists outside of America. Jake pointedly avoids all popular American culture (with the exception of his own American expatriate circle) that he comes into contact with in *The Sun Also Rises*. In “Book One: Paris,” we find Jake lamenting the invasion of the American tourists who have invaded France. During an iconic Parisian café scene, Jake tries to escape from the far reaches of American culture in vain: “Someone had put it in the American Women’s Club list as a quaint restaurant on the Paris quais as yet untouched by Americans, so we had to wait forty-five minutes for a table” Hemmingway, *Sun* 82). Because Jake is trying to distance himself from America, he dislikes its presence in Paris. Jake’s sarcasm towards those associated with the American Women’s Club further indicates his disapproval and estrangement from his homeland.
Yet, even as Jake Barnes tries to move away from America and its culture, he simultaneously participates in a pattern rooted in American frontier mythology. Jake’s exchange with the American Women’s Club in the crowded café reveals his aversion to American culture and his preference for being an outsider. Jake’s hostility toward the club and the crowded restaurant demonstrates Jake’s desire for a place free from familiar social constructions. Like Francis Parkman and the pioneer of American frontier myth, Jake wants to get away from the masses that come with well-established and overly feminized cultures. The landscape of Paris is associated with a cultural softening that Hemingway seeks to escape from.

*The Sun Also Rises* portrays Jake as a frontiersman on the threshold of new experience. In Book I, Jake narrates Paris as the “frontier line” or jumping off point for a frontier experience. Like Parkman’s Independence, Missouri, Jake crosses into a borderland that takes him away from America and into a European landscape which mimics the cultural unknown of America’s old frontier. The most significant sign that we are in new territory is the fact that there are so many bar scenes: in America at this time, drinking was outlawed by Prohibition. Nearly every scene in the city hinges around a drinking establishment, and the characters introduced in Hemingway’s urban Paris reveal people who would be on the social fringes in America, including the prostitute Georgette, a group of gay men in a dance hall, and various artists. These urban Parisian landscapes blend elements of American culture with the foreign values and traditions of an unfamiliar place. As the frontier line, Paris blends aspects of both civilization and culture with the “savagery” of frontier space and its freedom from typical societal boundaries.
The Parisian café scene establishes the fact that this urban, civilized landscape is not the type that the narrator would prefer to encounter. Like the frontiersman, Jake is searching a place outside the typical safety net of one’s home and turns toward the rural landscape where he might escape cultural trappings. Book II marks the text’s structural break from the urban landscape of Paris as the narrator moves away from French civilization, signifying an import shift marking the narrator’s entrance into the frontier. For the narrator to escape the control and influence of all forms of culture, he must move toward a place undeveloped by culture with which he is familiar. It is here that the narrator crosses the frontier line and begins his mythic journey into the frontier.

At this break in the narrative Jake moves from a space that is known to one that is unknown and begins communing with the land: “We crossed the Spanish frontier (Hemmingway, *Sun*, 98).” Suddenly, after crossing into the “frontier” the text details landscapes for several pages at a time giving a break to the narrative’s constant dialogue and takes great care to present the bucolic qualities of nature which appear to surround them as they leave Paris behind and enter a pastoral landscape:

[We]… started up the white dusty road into Spain. For a while the country was much as it had been; then, climbing all the time, we crossed the top of a Col, the road winding back and forth on itself, and then it was really Spain. There were long brown mountains and a few pines and far-off forests of beech trees on some of the mountainsides. The road went along the summit of the Col and then dropped down… We came down out of the mountains and through an oak forest, and there were while cattle grazing in the forest. Down below there were grassy plains and clear streams, and then we crossed a stream and went through a gloomy little village, and started to climb again. We climbed up and up and crossed another high Col and turned along it, and the road ran down to the right, and we saw a whole new range of mountains off to the south, all brown and baked-looking and furrowed in strange shapes. (Hemmingway, *Sun* 99)
The narrative self-consciously marks this border crossing as one of great importance. Here, the narrative syntactically delineates Spain as a frontier region by bridging two distinct sentences, marking the end of the “country as it had been” with a semicolon, and then crossing the threshold of the sentence into a new space: “and then it was really Spain”. The narrator has entered the frontier.

Jake’s journey into Spanish territory marks his entrance into a pastoral landscape with few signs of modern development. The importance of this shift is hinted at in the novel’s epigram, which states that though generations come and go, the “earth abideth forever” (Hemmingway, *Sun* 7). This biblical quote suggests that a relationship with land is paramount to the novel’s quest for generational autonomy. Portraying the earth’s landscape as the ultimate equalizer of humanity invokes Parkman’s pioneering attitude which defines the frontier as a place where “each man lives by the strength of his arm and the valor of his heart,” and as a testing ground for the virility of civilizations. This reveals Hemingway’s vision of the European landscape as the new “world” frontier and the author’s transposing of an American frontier landscape onto the old world. Like Parkman’s *The Oregon Trail*, Hemingway’s text is also an American pastoral romance set in Europe. Like the American pastoral romance, Hemingway’s text is, played out in some variant of symbolic setting. The action is set in motion by a pastoral impulse – the protagonist’s familiar urge, in the face of the established order’s growing complexity and power, to get away…The pastoral figure retreats from this alienating situation to a terrain marked by fewer signs of human intervention. (Marx 490)

Like Parkman, Hemingway seeks a place independent of cultural constraints so that he can come to understand his culture and place within it on his own terms.
Although Hemingway attempts to distance himself America, *The Sun Also Rises* directly participates in America’s old frontier myth tradition. Jake leaves his homeland (America) behind in order to come into contact with frontier landscapes. Like past American pioneers, Jake jumps off from the frontier line (Paris) and leaves the known “civilized” country behind him, entering unfamiliar territory marked by “strange shapes” (*Sun* 99). Progressing deep into frontier country, Jake notes that “the horizon kept changing” and that the mountains become even more “strangely shaped” (*Sun* 114). Once in this unfamiliar setting, Jake announces that they have entered the Spanish “frontier” (*Sun* 98). The landscape shift in *The Sun Also Rises* from frontier line into the unfamiliar territory of the frontier evokes imagery of the pioneer experience in the American frontier and correctly aligns Jake with the frontier myth tradition.

Hemingway reinforces that the Spanish landscape is a frontier in Jake’s motivations for entering it. In Fredrick Jackson Turner’s “Frontier Thesis,” Turner discusses the impact of the frontier upon the American character and explicates the pioneering impulse, arguing that one of the motivating factors for entering an unknown land was simply to leave their old lives behind. By entering the frontier in order to “escape from the bondage of the past…and the scorn of older society” frontiersmen were able to reject the “bondage” of cultural constraints (14). Jake’s choice for movement is essential for the act of creating the narrator’s individuality.

Ironically, the landscape of Spain is even more heavily inscribed with its own sense of place and culture, yet Hemingway chooses Spain because it is represents America’s “Other” in many ways. The Spanish landscape evokes imagery of the Old World, the perfect anti-thesis to America’s sense of place as the New World. Though
America contained more open, rural space that Spain, in Hemingway’s time it no longer functioned as a place where Americans could escape from clutches of a distinctively American sense of place. The Old World landscape of Spain represents a new cultural frontier where the constraints of Americanism did not reach. Of course, Spain is no such thing, but when traveling across the soil of the Spanish countryside Jake is able to leave his old identity behind and the typical expatriate preoccupations are forgotten as they absorb the otherness of pastoral Spain. In the “new” landscape of Spain, Jake’s social connections become meaningless as he travels through the countryside and his old identity begins to fall away.

The cycle of movement of breaking with the old ways and becoming transformed through exposure to a wild, unfamiliar landscape is a distinctly American frontier myth impulse, and it is one that figures heavily in *Sun*. After arriving in Spain, his friend and traveling companion Bill announciates that Jake’s underlying reasons for coming to Spain is to leave his old life behind. Bill sarcastically invokes the Lost Generation’s values in conversation with Jake before they embark on long journey into the Spanish countryside, when he says: “You know what you are? You’re an expatriate. *You’ve lost touch with the soil* [Emphasis mine]. You get precious. You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex… You’re an expatriate, see?” (Hemmingway, *Sun* 120). Although Jake’s friend Bill is clearly teasing Jake in his typical bantering way, Bill sets up the text’s destruction of Jake as expatriate through the juxtaposition of the expatriate lifestyle with lifestyle which Jake and Bill adopt while in Spain. This quote insinuates that Jake’s true motivation for entering into the “frontier” is not for mere
recreation or pleasure, but rather to abandon the trappings ascribed to the Lost Generation and his old sense of place.

In the frontier Jake is able to assert his independence on his own terms and without the guidance of “civilization.” This textual break indicates that the narrator must learn to navigate new territory. Jake must be able to assimilate to the differences in landscapes through which he is moving. To do this, he adopts Turner’s pioneer model in which movement through “…the frontier is productive of individualism… [The Pioneer’s] tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control (Turner 30).” These same instincts compel Jake into the unknown, for it is a model in which Jake enacts taking control of his own identity by leaving the remnants of civilization behind him, and finding his own way.

As Jake moves further and further away from American culture, he begins to focuses on the otherness of the landscape. His intent in Spain is to fish and, of course, watch bull fights, but more importantly Jake wants to experience a sense of place like the old American frontier. Like the frontiersman described by literary historian Leo Marx, Jake retreats to a terrain marked by fewer signs of human intervention so that he may be “closer to nature”:

A sandy road led down to the ford and beyond into the woods. The path crossed the stream on another foot-log below the ford, and joined the road, and we went into the woods. It was a beech wood and the trees were very old. Their roots bulked above the ground and the branches were twisted. We walked in the road between the thick trunks of the old beeches and the sunlight came through the leaves in light patches on the grass. The trees were big, and the foliage was thick but it was not gloomy. There was no undergrowth, only the smooth grass, very green and fresh and the big gray trees well spaced as though it were a park.

‘This is country,’ Bill said. (Hemmingway, Sun 122)
The fishing trip into the Spanish frontier helps Jake counteract the effects of over-civilization and takes him back to a time before the encroachment of modernization that came after the industrial revolution. The novel’s lengthy commune into the frontier’s landscape exalts in detail the beauty of the Spanish landscape and the physical earth. Every step of their journey across the rural landscape is carefully described, and Jake’s lush descriptions of the surrounding landscape clarify Jake’s contentment with the bucolic setting of the Spanish “frontier.”

The narrative depicts Jake as a competent frontiersman by focusing on setting and descriptions of the Spanish landscape, and Jake’s ability to find his way within it. As they travel deep into Spanish countryside and into the heart of the frontier, crossing the landscape becomes increasingly difficult:

‘Ahead the road came out of the forest and went along the shoulder of the ridge of hills. The hills ahead were not wooded, and there were great fields of yellow gorse. Way off we saw the steep bluffs, dark with trees and jutting with gray stone, that marked the course of the Irati River. ‘We have to follow this road along the ridge, cross these hills, go through the woods on the far hills, and come down to the Irati valley,’ I pointed out to Bill. ‘That’s a hell of hike.’ ‘It’s too far to go and fish and come back the same day, comfortably.’ ‘Comfortably. That’s a nice word. We’ll have to go like hell to get there and have any fishing at all.’ (Hemmingway, Sun 122)

Although it is arduous, Jake clearly enjoys leading the trip and remains cheerful in spite of Bill’s wry complaints. Obviously, the goal of this journey is not for leisure or fishing, but for the journey itself. The scene of Jake and Bill’s fishing voyage is important because it shows that the trip is not one of casual enjoyment, but one which allows space for Jake’s individual transformation from expatriate to pioneer.
It is Jake’s mission for autonomy and a greater level of independence from cultural influence which propels them on their frontier journey into the Spanish landscape. The frontier puts Jake in a place where he can slip into a pioneering role because it is place envisioned as free from many of the cultural trappings associated with civilization. Here, he can temporarily remake his core values, just as Parkman had done. After the frontier excursion, Jake indicates that the mission behind his journey is more than just wandering; it is to find wisdom of his own making by getting in touch with the earth. Jake articulates his impulse in his longest and most personal example of internal dialogue in the narrative: “Perhaps as you went along you did learn something. I did not care what it was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it. Maybe if you found out how to live in it you learned from that what it was all about” (Hemingway, Sun 152). It is Jake’s desire for a practical knowledge of how to survive in the world that drives him.

Jake’s divulgence hints that Hemingway’s overall purpose in The Sun Also Rises is to rejuvenate the frontier myth by expanding its borders. Like Hemingway, Jake’s quote reveals his need to break away from the greater cultural group in order to “learn something” about the world and to establish a direct relationship with it. Clearly, Jake wants to revise cultural boundaries and reinvent the frontier. While the physical American frontier is gone, the text supposes that there is another –perhaps cultural-frontier to embark upon. To create an authentic American identity for Jake, Hemingway transposes the American frontier landscape onto the European landscape. He re-imagines the frontier so he can claim independence for himself, but also, as the epigraphs imply, for his generation.
Jake’s search for independence and seeking first-hand knowledge of “how to live” in the world hearkens back to the novel’s initial claims which emphatically deny being “lost”. With the epigram, Hemingway makes it clear from the outset that the novel seeks a break with past American generations, and by culturally breaking with America in order to create, produce, and publish *The Sun Also Rises* in Paris Hemingway makes the text itself a symbol of expatriatism. The narrative’s distance from its homeland is also reinforced by using an American exile (Jake Barnes) for narrating the novel and navigating the narrator’s quest. Yet, in order to answer Jake’s question, “how to live in it” Hemingway reverts to the frontier myth tradition in American literature. Although the novel sometimes portrays itself as a generational counter movement to mainstream American culture, and appears to move further and further away from America during the progress of the narrative, the text in fact relies upon a pattern deeply rooted in American frontier mythology- one of the reasons why I read it as an expression of cultural colonization.

By transposing the American frontier landscape onto the European landscape, Hemingway inscribes America’s cultural model upon European space. While the physical frontier is gone, the text supposes that there is another -perhaps cultural- frontier to embark upon independent of familiar cultural constraints. Hemingway uses the text to update the image of American frontiersman in Europe. Jake’s travels across the landscape of the Spanish frontier are not unlike the travels of Parkman because each seeks to distance himself from his “old” American identity. Using the American frontier model, Jake moves farther and farther away from the physical boundaries of his homeland in search of a new place and new experience.
This intentional movement away is emphasized in the lengthy frontier crossing scenes. The recurring image of the dirt road that Jake and Bill must follow through the Spanish frontier evokes the wagon trails of the American west, and shortly after they arrive in Spain, Jake notices, “…a long string of six mules, following one after the other, hauling a high-hooded wagon loaded with freight. The wagon and the mules were covered with dust. Close behind was another string of mules and another wagon” (Hemmingway, *Sun* 111). The road that they share with the wagon train leads them further into the back country of Spain. Their slow progression along the winding, dusty road and abundance of verbs like “climbing” and “crossing,” is all similar to the movement of pioneers on a wagon trail. Jake and Bill face several fords, and must find their course by way of geographic landmarks such as “the steep bluffs, dark with trees and jutting with gray stone, that marked the course of the Irati River” and an old beech wood. The wagon road crosses the “…wide plain” with “a big river off on the right shining in the sun from between the line of trees…” (Hemmingway, *Sun* 799). Jake’s vision is dominated by the “far off forests” and “grassy plains” over which they travel, landscapes highly reminiscent of Parkman’s journey across the prairies and mountain ranges encountered in America’s old frontier. Wagon trails “…stretched out white across the plain…” mark Jake’s retreat from culture into nature (Hemmingway, *Sun* 99).

By choosing an expatriated setting for the novel, Hemingway implies that the narrative’s quest for independence cannot be achieved in America. The American tradition which escaped the oppression of the cultural past in order to be reborn in the frontier no longer had an outlet in America, because the old frontier had vanished. In the face of this, Hemingway looked to Europe to “…diverge from the well beaten path of
literary tradition” and undertake a frontier experience. This frontier impulse would impel Hemingway to join “the younger and footloose intellectuals… streaming up the longest gangplank in the world… preparing for a great migration eastward into new prairies of the mind” (Cowley, *Exile’s 79). Like his pioneering ancestors, wants to Hemingway cast off constraints of nationality, borders, and region in order to cross borders and boundaries in the pursuit of cultural revision and to make a place for himself in the world.

Ironically, as Jake physically moves further and further away from America in the text, he begins participating more heavily in a pattern of transformation deeply rooted in American frontier myth. Hemingway’s frontier landscapes allow Jake to access his American identity and join “…so many of the conspicuous voices and characters in American literature [which] tend to join the recovery of the self with the recovery of the natural, and to represent their deepest longings in numinous visions of landscape” (Marx 490). These examples highlight the way in which the abundance of American frontier imagery working upon Jake, and consciously connects the novel to its mythology.

*The Sun Also Rises* attempts to stake a claim for a newfound independence for American authors of the lost generation in European territory. Hemingway’s novel tries to rejuvenate the American frontier myth by looking “eastward to new prairies of the mind” and remaking the frontier in Europe in order to establish independence from America and the older generations that deem his “lost.” He purposefully abstracts the idea of the American frontier in an attempt to demonstrate the new generation’s participation in a cultural “frontier experience.” The ravenous search for new cultural horizons demonstrates Hemingway’s repetition of American frontier myth and its more pernicious aspects, further evidenced by Margot Norris’s *Modernist Eruptions*:
Against the background of the changing social and political developments of America in the twenties and thirties, the exoticism of Hemingway’s settings and the solipsism of his concerns gradually made his fiction seem escapist and relevant only on the level of a specific American mythology, his modern and cosmopolitan updating of the figure of the American Western hero, the pioneer, the gunslinger, the cowboy. (322)

Decidedly, Hemingway’s desire for a radical break in the traditions of older American generations in The Sun Also Rises is never fully realized. The novel’s repetition of the frontier myth in The Sun Also Rises under the guise of the dawning of a new generation evidences the failure of the frontier myth. Instead of formulating a new sense of place for America or re-creating generational values, Hemingway chooses to adopt European space in order to temporarily repeat America’s cultural mythology.

Hemingway’s text is not a radical departure from the old traditions and values but a repetition of the frontier mythology’s oldest folly: colonization. Americanizing European space in The Sun Also Rises tacitly invites America’s cultural and literary models to roost overseas into European territory. Hemingway’s Europe becomes an Americanized place by participating American myth on European grounds. But this kind of cultural colonization imports American models into the European consciousness. Ultimately, Hemingway’s metaphorical colonization of European space as a place where Americans can become more American fails to recognize European landscapes as being culturally independent. Hemingway rewrites his own culture onto the European landscape, but claims it as a place of deeply American experience. Because of this mingling of landscapes, the novel cannot make a place for the “lost” of his generation because, as Tuan states:
Place… is the past and the present, stability and achievement… [It] is not just a launching pad for space, or for dreams of interminable expansion. It is the human home in the cosmic scheme of things… [A sense of place] is sustained… by the quality of human awareness. (Place 165)
CHAPTER IV

WONDERING WHERE: DEBUNKING
FRONTIER MYTHOLOGY AS A
RELIABLE NARRATIVE

Joan Didion’s *Where I Was From*

All that is constant about the California of my childhood is the rate at which it disappears.
Didion, J., *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*

My previous chapters on Francis Parkman Jr.’s *The Oregon Trail* and Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* have shown how popular western narratives based in American frontier mythology have used the myth to construct a peculiar brand of Americanism which endeavors to find a “fair, blank page on which to write a new chapter in the story of man’s struggle for a higher type of society” (Turner 261). This kind of place-making breaks from established centers of experience (places), culture, and community in order to fulfill the myth’s promise of rebirth. But what Joan Didion wants to know, is what happens when we attenuate the bonds of cultural continuity and repeatedly abandon place? Like fellow American authors Parkman and the expatriate Hemingway, Joan Didion’s text, *Where I was From*, contributes to the body of literature based in American frontier mythology but from a more probing and critical twenty-first century viewpoint.
Unlike fellow American authors Parkman and Hemingway, Didion is a product of the West and sensitively attuned to the stories of its heritage. Born in Sacramento, California, in 1934, Joan Didion is a fifth generation Californian whose family was one of the first to settle California’s Central Valley. Her ancestors were part of the 1846-47 overland migration that Parkman wrote about in *The Oregon Trail*. Her relatives even traveled part way across the frontier with the doomed Donner-Reed party (Friedman, *Essays* 68). Because of this heritage, Didion has an especially deep connection to the “old west” and its relevance to the modern west, even though at first glance the old west and new west seem to look nothing alike.

It is the glaring disparity between the old west and the new west that suggest a troubled sense of place for America’s old frontier landscape. Literary historian Richard Slotkin evidences the tension between traditional and modern narratives that serve to establish place:

> The continual social and cultural turmoil of modern societies creates a dialectic between myth and ideology – between the system of symbolizing stories that sustains, invokes, and carries traditional values and world views, and the rapidly-changing body of arguments. (Slotkin 611)

Though the old myth seems to have been subsumed by a “rapidly changing body of arguments” and a more modern ideology, Didion shows the legacy of frontier mythology to be alive and well in American culture. In fact, it is this propensity for radical shape shifting in the American dialectic of myth and ideology that Didion believes leads to an unstable, shifting sense of place for the west.

Didion’s acquaintance with the power of frontier mythology over a western sense of identity is evidenced in Michiko Kakutani’s critical essay, “Joan Didion: Staking
Out California.” Kakutani shows Didion’s connection to the western landscape and narratives of frontier myth when Kakutani states:

CA belongs to Joan Didion.
Not the California where everyone wears aviator sunglasses, owns a Jacuzzi and buys his clothes on Rodeo Drive. But California in the sense of the West. The old West where Manifest Destiny was an almost palpable notion that was somehow tied to the land and the climate and one’s own family- an unspoken belief that was passed down to children in stories and sayings. (Friedman 30)

Though at first glance there seem to be no similarities between America’s frontier past and California’s modern landscape, Didion realizes that the frontier and its mythology is in fact central to understanding where she came from. Her 2003 text, Where I was From, acknowledges the importance of frontier mythology’s role to portray an American sense of place but reveals an ambivalence regarding both the place from which she comes from and its mythological roots. In Where I was From, Didion laments the frontier myth’s propensity to undermine the establishment of an enduring “sense of place” for the American landscape and debunks frontier mythology as a reliable narrative for articulating American identity.

In Where I was From, Joan Didion picks up the notion of the American west as a mythic place in order to examine its lasting impact on American culture. Didion, like cultural geographer Yi Fu Tuan, understands how geography and place are constructed through the nature of language and narrative. Both believe myth to be central to the understanding of place. To really see California as Place, Didion engages previous narratives which hearken back to America frontier myth, past and present. This is evidenced by literary critic Jennifer Bradley in her article, “Points West, Then and Now: the Fiction of Joan Didion” when she states that:
Didion’s writings in particular demand an act of historical imagination on the part of the reader, an understanding of the mythic heritage of ‘Points West.’ While she is first and always a writer rather than a social historian of the Far West, her novels and essays return ineluctably to that promise of starting fresh that the American frontier once seemed to offer: the ‘cutting clean which was to have redeemed them’ and us ‘all.’ *(Run River)* (Friedman 43)

Bradley’s passage suggests that to understand Didion’s sense of place as American, and native Californian, one must first understand the power of the American west’s “mythic heritage.” In *Where I was From*, the past is essential for understanding the present and our current sense of place (Didion 2003).

Didion’s preoccupation with the American frontier myth and its effects upon our culture taps into the vital dialectic of modern ideologies and place-making today. Culturally, myths function to strengthen the bond between various place and their inhabitants- a kind of cultural “glue,” if you will. In Yi Fu Tuan’s article, “Language and the Making of Place: A Narrative Descriptive Approach,” he argues that places are brought into being through the nature of language, and that “…storytelling converts mere objects ‘out there’ into real presences (686).” Thus, places only become identifiable “places” when experienced and brought into being through language. Myths are especially powerful narratives in the process of place making, Tuan argues, because they “have this power to an outstanding degree because they are not just any story but are foundational stories that…strengthen a people’s bond to place *(Language* 686). Myths, then, not only define place but help to bring that place into being. Tuan’s argument that the nature of language calls a Place into existence -à la Heidegger- means language has the power to create place, American myth the power to create America.
It is impossible for Didion to distinguish the geographical delineation of the west from the west which is rooted in myth. Indeed, the power that the myth has had over America’s western landscape and its cultural construction has been vast, Didion argues, and began from the time the first frontiersmen arrived in the west. *Where I was From* gives us an example of how the myth has manifested upon the old frontier lands and the geography of California and of how the myth has made the western landscape even more symbolic of rebirth than it already is. Didion demonstrates this fact by describing how her ancestor’s settled the Sacramento River’s hostile flood lands, where the landscape’s own restoration occurred monumentally every year. Yet, even in the face of this catastrophic flooding, settlers could not be dissuaded:

Yet this river that had been from the beginning his destination was one regularly and predictably given, during all but the driest of those years before its flow was controlled or rearranged, to turning its valley into a shallow freshwater sea a hundred miles long and as wide as the distance between the coast ranges and the foothills of the Sierra Nevada… (Didion, *Where* 20)

The western pioneer’s affinity with this symbolic landscape is apropos because it frequently remakes the physical landscape of the surrounding region each year and is a natural manifestation of rebirth. Inevitably, the inheritors of these lands will take this rebirth once step farther, by rearranging the flow of the water through the landscape, remaking Sacramento once again.

Didion’s sweeping depiction of the Central Valley flooded like a “freshwater sea” evokes imagery of the Biblical flood myth and reveals a fitting allegory for Didion’s conception of the American frontier myth. In the Biblical flood myth, nearly all life on earth was destroyed in order to allow for the development of more favorable living conditions on earth. Didion sees that the frontier myth has worked in a similar fashion
upon the west, and that the myth also tends to destroy what came before it in hopes of favorable living conditions. In this effort, Didion’s ancestors “rearrange” the Sacramento River: “Many Sacramento houses during my childhood had on their walls one or another lithograph showing the familiar downtown grid with streets of water,” Didion writes, “through which citizens could be seen going about their business by raft or rowboat” (Where 20). This unique chapter in Sacramento’s history concluded with the construction of the dams, and is now forgotten or unknown to many. Although this rearrangement encourages pioneer settlement and an economic expansion for the region, it does so at the expense of the old landscape and the old ways of life.

Though the power of myth is to build bonds, Didion’s sense of the myth contradicts this aspect. In Where I was From, California stands as a geographic symbol of the myth’s tendency to undermine bonds to place:

Stressing as it did an extreme if ungrounded individualism this was not an ambiance that tended toward a view of life as defined or limited or controlled, or even in any way affected, by the social and economic structures of the larger world. To be a Californian was to see oneself, if one believed the lessons the place seemed most immediately to offer, as affected only by “nature,” which in turn was seen to exist simultaneously as a source of inspiration and renewal. (Where 66)

The overweening drive for the frontier rebirth experience: for the individualism of “starting fresh” and “cutting clean,” would become foundational in the construction of the west, and Didion’s interpretation of it. Didion knows that popular western narratives engaging in frontier mythology tend to cast the frontier as a mythic place of rebirth, symbolic of a democratic form of American individualism; a place where a person could begin tabula rasa with a “fair, blank page on which to write a new chapter” (Turner 1962). The impulse to inscribe a “fair, blank page” shows the attempts of frontier
narratives to revise cultural problems within the American experience by leaving them behind and starting “fresh.”

Didion identifies with an American pioneering heritage but recognizes the elusiveness of identifying where she was from, from this vantage point. She begins by tracing the origins of her pioneer ancestors who steadily moved westward from one frontier to the next; first in Virginia and Carolina, then Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas and finally, Sacramento, California. Didion reports that these frontier ancestors were “given to breaking clean with everyone and everything they knew” in order to come west, ultimately settling in the furthest extremity of America’s western frontier: California. As Didion’s points out, California has no stable identity to narrate, because the frontier myth continuously remakes the western landscape and sense of place. The locus of western identity in frontier myth lies in a constant state of becoming, slipperiness evidenced by Didion when she writes: “Such calls to dwell upon the place and its meaning (and, if the meaning proved intractable, to reinvent the place) had been general in California since the first American settlement…” (Where 29). Here, Didion indicates that the frontier style of place-making in California has encouraged the landscape to adopt more fluid identities. For her, this continued reinvention of place produces a cultural fluidity that obfuscates Didion’s own sense of place and complicates the myth’s ability to narrate a cohesive western identity.

Didion, like Tuan, understands how place is constructed through language and narrative, and she understands that myths are supposed to bond a people to place. Yet, Didion perceives that the myth has done the opposite, and that frontier mythology hasn’t established our bonds to place, but undermined them. She sees tendency for narratives
rooted in frontier mythology to continually remake the west, leading to a sense of place continually changing. This cultural fluidity, Didion believes, is essential to understanding the modern ideology behind America’s style of place-making, and why Americans now “… drifted from city to torn city, sloughing off both the past and the future as snakes shed their skins, children who were never taught and would never now learn the games that had held the society together” (Stories 67). The intense individualism that once propelled people like Parkman into the frontier also came to breed an abhorrence of “games” used to serve to unite society. Here, Didion points to the myth’s pernicious effects upon America’s socio-cultural bonds, and the apparent defectiveness of our societal “glue.”

Myths typically strengthen the bond between various places and their inhabitants, but Didion senses that American frontier mythology has had the opposite effect on western culture. Instead of bonding people to a sense of community and place, the myth has attenuated the very relationships that hold California together:

Not much about California, on its own preferred terms, has encouraged its children to see themselves as connected to one another. The separation, of north from south – and even more acutely of west from east, of the urban coast from the agricultural valleys and of both the coast and the valleys from the mountain and desert regions to their east- was profound, fueled by the rancor of water wars and by less tangible but even more rancorous differences in attitude and culture. (Where 64)

In this passage, Didion shows how the myth’s insatiability for independence has cut off relationships between people, regions, and communities. Didion’s California stands as a geographic symbol of the effects of the American frontier myth upon the western sense of place. Habitually cutting cultural ties threatens place-making by undermining previously written chapters of cultural identity and places already established as centers of
experience that give place nuance. Often the chapters are “thrown out” undermining the myth’s power to articulate a cohesive sense of place for America.

The problem with the mythology upon place-making in Didion’s California is that places cannot be maintained if the rate of cultural turnover is too high. This aspect of the mythic American impulse must be understood, Didion argues, to make sense of the current cultural geography. Her vivid portraits of place in California represent larger cultural trends which suggest there has been a collapse in maintaining America’s bonds to place. Places, she observes, seem to deteriorate quickly after they lose their novelty. This phenomenon is evidenced in Didion’s image of Howard Hughes’ house in Old Hollywood, a place in decay, a powerhouse producer of American culture nearly forgotten:

Seven Thousand Romaine Street is in that part of Los Angeles familiar to admirers of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett: the underside of Hollywood, south of Sunset Boulevard, a middle-class slum of “model-studios” and warehouses and two family-bungalows. Because Paramount and Columbia and Desilu and the Samuel Goldwyn studios are nearby, many of the people who live around here have some tenuous connection with the motion-picture industry. They once processes fan photographs, say, or knew Jean Harlow’s manicurist. 7000 Romaine looks itself like a faded movie exterior, a pastel building with chipped art moderne detailing, the windows now either boarded or paneled with chicken wire glass and, at the entrance, among the dusty oleander, a rubber mat that reads WELCOME. (Stories 56)

The decrepit image of Hughes’ abandoned house with its now passé “art moderne detailing” is an apt metaphor for the frontier myth’s affects on place-making and conversely, American culture. During the Golden Age of Hollywood, Howard Hughes was the personification of a huge economic empire: a vibrant symbol of “the next big thing.” Not long before a symbol of American cultural production, Hughes deserted house in Old Hollywood now stands as a reminder of the rapidity of American cultural
turnover. The “it” thing is old as soon as it’s minted because people want the next new thing as quickly as it can be made. This leaves American place-making in danger of being easily subsumed, and indeed, Hollywood is a fitting example of such a place of rapid American cultural turnover.

Didion finds that there is something unsettling in such a cultural thirst for rebirth. According to western myth, one may be reborn many times in one life span without confronting the finality of death. The ordinary life cycle that begins with birth and ends in death is transposed in the mythology of the west, allowing a continuous cycle of becoming, or as the narrator puts it, a “wagons-west refusal to grant death its dominion” (Didion, Where 192). This passage is evidence that the pioneer “death” itself was not actually a death at all, but simply a part of the birthing process – not an actual end, but a new state of being. Didion’s narrative is wary of the patrimonies of western myth that make the western landscape such a supernatural place. The rebirth experience is what makes transmogrification possible, yet it disrupts the natural life cycle. In this mythological cycle, the identity constructed must eventually turn on itself, and kill itself. Though the west is professed to be a place rooted in a narrative history of wilderness, Didion points out that the western “refusal to grant death its dominion” is highly unnatural, undermining the most basic life cycle. Where I was From questions how a place so symbolic of nature can be so unnatural in its approach to establishing California and the American west.

Didion reveals the frontier myth’s destructive side effect upon forming lasting connections between people and places in a particularly poignant moment in the narrative in which she describes the state of her family graveyard. It is a very old California
graveyard, “the Matthew Kilgore Cemetery, its gates long gone, its two-hundred-some stone graves overgrown and many of its stone markers, overturned” in which two of her great-great-great grandparents were buried in the late 1800’s (Didion, Where 190). It is a place steeped local history and for the narrator, personal history. But the graveyard’s personal and historical value clearly lack significance to the generations who have inherited its legacy:

In the 1980’s, when the condition of the Kilgore Cemetery had become a matter of local concern (vandals had dug up a body and stolen its head), the president of the Rancho Cordova Chamber of Commerce appealed to “Cordovans”… to join a volunteer effort to clean up the beer bottles and debris left by trespassers...

I asked, when my mother and I next spoke, if the family- the seventy-some of my father’s cousins who annually attended the Kilgore family reunion in McKinley Park in East Sacramento, say- was joining the effort to clean up the Kilgore Cemetery.

The family, my mother said, did not own the Kilgore Cemetery.

It occurred to me that neither did the president of the Rancho Cordova Chamber of Commerce own the Kilgore Cemetery, but I opted to go in a different direction. I asked how exactly it had come to pass that the family did not own the Kilgore Cemetery.

‘I presume somebody sold it,’ my mother said. (Didion, Where 191)

Didion’s image of the abandoned Kilgore Cemetery where familial, regional, and cultural history lays decaying is evidence of the frontier myth’s destructive side effect upon forming lasting connections between people and places. Didion’s mother (and scores of relatives) feels no ownership for the cemetery in which their dead ancestors are buried. It would seem that there would be no place more profoundly personal than a family graveyard, especially one with such history, but the narrative exchange is evidence that the frontier myth’s continuous cycle of rebirth kills traditions, even the most personal forms of history and cultural ceremony. With this example, Didion shows the flipside of
the frontier myth in pioneering narratives: homes must be abandoned, cultural traditions
must be jettisoned, and the past must be cast off.

In *Where I was From*, Didion takes stock of what the search for “the next big
thing” has had upon the western landscape in the twenty-first century. Driving through
the suburban sprawl of Los Angeles, she sees miles and miles of space organized into
cities, subdivisions and industrial parks:

One afternoon in September of 2002 I drove the length of the Alameda Corridor,
north from the port through what had been the industrial heart of Southern
California: Carson, Compton, Watts, Lynwood, South Gate, Huntington Park,
Vernon… On the first hill north of Signal Hill there was what appeared to be a new
subdivision, with a sign, ‘Vista Industria.’ Past the sign that read Vista Industria
there were only more warehouses, miles of warehouses, miles of empty
intersections, one Gateway City after another, each indistinguishable from the last.
(151)

Here, we see Parkman’s expansive vision of the old west erased by “miles” of cities
punctuated only by commas, flowing one directly into the next, without distinction, “each
indistinguishable from the last.” It is a cookie cutter landscape of freeways, intersections,
city-zones and subdivisions. Didion’s image of an urban wasteland surfaces because the
landscape has simply been reborn too many times -exemplified by Didion’s note of a land
developer’s attempt to remake a piece of the “industrial heart” of Southern California into
a community such as “Vista Industira.”

What one feels from this slice of Los Angeles landscape, is a sense of
placeless-ness which Didion’s narrative shows to be a side effect arising from the cultural
remnants of American frontier myth in the twenty-first century. Transforming a given
unit of space into a *place* requires the accretion of experience built up over time, yet this
experiential continuity is exactly what the American frontier myth tends to diminish.
*Where I was From* brings the American frontier myth up-to-date by pointing out that myth’s inclination to continually break off from the past fundamentally undermines creating a sense of place, for the west and America as a whole. Though myths seek to explain the phenomena of our perceptions and strengthen the bond to place, Didion’s evidence of her family graveyard and ‘Vista Industria” argue that the American frontier myth has had the exact opposite effect (Tuan, *Language* 686).

Didion realizes that much is at stake in the implication that American frontier mythology undermines place-making. It’s not just the health of America’s culture that is at risk but also health of the state that is at risk. Because the myth attenuates cultural bonds to place, California becomes fragile in the process. *Where I was From* indicates that the rapid rate of cultural turnover is a menace to the state’s infrastructure - the very bones that serve to hold the place together:

Californians of more programmatic mind for many years presented these postwar changes as positive, the very genius of the place: it was conventional to mention the freeway system, the aerospace industry, the University of California Master Plan, Silicon Valley, the massive rearrangement of the water that got funded when Pat Brown was governor, the entire famous package, the celebrated promise that California was committed to creating and educating an apparently infinitely expandable middle class. The more recent programmatic attitude was to construe the same changes as negative, false promises: the freeways encouraged sprawl, the aerospace industry had gone away, the University of California had lost faculty and classrooms to budget cuts, Silicon Valley had put housing beyond the means of non-tech California, and most of the state was still short water. (*Where* 171)

This passage highlights just how hard it is to keep up with the changes in California’s sense of place because the identity of the landscape is so mercurial. The foundation stones of California’s society: the educational system, transportation and freeway systems, economic centers, and even its water resources are risk of losing their viability in the face of shifting attitudes and changes in place-making ideology.
Though she understands the importance of the frontier to American heritage, *Where I was From* debunks frontier mythology as a reliable narrative cultural identity in California and the American west. The sense of place for the American west is in danger of being deconstructed by its own transformative impulse. “All that is constant about the California from my childhood is the rate at which it disappears,” Didion writes, demonstrating the toll of rapid cultural turnover on the Californian landscape (*Stories* 134). *Where I was From* argues that without a significant counterbalance, a side effect of American frontier mythology is a fragmented culture. If America has been built by mythological narratives which habitually *deconstruct*, instead of construct, an American identity, then it the myth has failed to establish a reliable cultural narrative.

While this mythic cycle affords new opportunities for growth enjoyed by past American generations, it also presents a challenge for narrating a sense of place for the west. Didion realizes that myth has the power to “make” America, or in the case of the frontier myth, potentially destroy it. By showing us both the old and the new west, drawing eclectically from desultory tidbits taken from various authors, historians, works of journalism, artists, public documents and accounts from various Californian personalities, both past and present in order to articulate Didon’s sense of place, she keeps the past sense of place from slipping away. The many narrative fragments that comprise each chapter of *Where I was From* structurally reflect the changing aspect of western identity, a fitting narrative structure for a mythic place shrouded in a past which is rooted in a mythology which constantly changes and remakes itself. Although Didon’s *Where I was From* can’t produce a cohesive narrative for California or the American west, Didion’s text forges a connection between these disparate cultural narratives and
helps momentarily restore the relevance of “custom and community” and the “games that held society together.” By gathering together such heterogeneous articulations of California’s sense of place in America, Didion’s text momentarily resurrects past cultural narratives in order to better understand the relationship between them and our current sense of place. In the process, her text re-sets the trajectory of the mythology so that it invites cultural connections instead of undermining them.

Didion carries on the tradition of writing literature of rooted in America’s pioneering past, but revises it. While she acknowledges the importance of America’s pioneering past to the American narrative, Where I was From shows that repeated rebirth effected the abandonment of family, history, community, and tradition in the west which “systematically erased freshly laid traces of custom and community” (Didion, Where 173). She shows that if left obscured, the insidious effects of the frontier myth upon the establishment of place can be destructive. For Didion, the frontier mythology of America’s pioneers must be understood from the perspective of the past as well as from the perspective of the current century in order to counter the myth’s anti-cultural effects and to be useful for articulating an enduring sense of place for America.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Destroy Popular Culture. Rebuild. Repeat.

Francis Parkman’s *The Oregon Trail*, Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, and Joan Didion’s *Where I was From* offer examples of how the frontier and its mythology have been a symbol of change in American literature. Of course, frontier mythology has other complexities but covering all of its aspects goes beyond the scope of my thesis. What I am most interested in is how American frontier mythology’s emphasis upon change creates a fascinating paradox in “place-making” and the reciprocal relationship between popular narratives and collective consciousness. Simply put, how does this myth complicate our conception of America as a place?

The quest for change in these narratives happens on several levels. On the narrative level, each text develops the frontier theme in order to articulate a unique “sense of place” for America. The settings of these novels are important because they all demonstrate a break from the past. Frontier narrators attempt to leave their old identity behind and offer musings of rebirth in order to articulate their ideal sense of American. Because narrators share their experience with the reader through the narrative, the mythic impulse for rebirth also becomes a broader cultural appeal that agitates for change within the reader. This powerful exchange begins to deconstruct the old sense of American identity in persuasion of a new vision, captured in the narrative as a frontier experience.
On a cultural level, frontier narratives provide a way to define the American experience and help construct a unique sense of place within the larger world. Yet, American frontier myth also introduces a paradox which complicates this place-making process. The frontier myth values cultural transformation and seeks to break from the culture and traditions of the past that disrupt the old sense of place. This tendency of the frontier mythology, Didion points out, “systematically erased freshly laid traces of custom and community” (Where 173). The paradox of using such a myth to strengthen a bond to place is that it simultaneously must dismantle prior customs and communities in order to develop new ones.

American literary narratives have often used the frontier in order to construct a unique sense of place within the larger world. But while the advantage of America’s frontier mythology is that it allows each generation to take advantage of the opportunity for transformation enjoyed by the last, it also raises difficulties in narrating an enduring sense of place for America. This point of difficulty is underscored by cultural geographer Yi Fu Tuan’s definition of places as “centers of experience” which invest our surroundings with meaning that can only by attained through direct experience. Tuan asserts that prolonged, deep involvement and intimate first person experience is the true way of place making and that “sense of place is rarely acquired in passing” (Tuan, Place 164). Though popular American narratives have often accessed the concept of the frontier to construct a unique sense of place within the larger world, long residence and deep involvement is abandoned in favor of new experience, and a new sense of place. Because of this mythic impulse, cultural and historical cohesion in America is attenuated, endangering sense of place and community.
Though transforming a given unit of space into a place requires the sustained accretion of experience over time, this experiential continuity is precisely what the frontier myth tends to diminish. Didion demonstrates that unless the myth’s negative interaction with place are counterbalanced, the urge to “Resist much/Obey little” doesn’t encourage a lasting cohesive identity on a narrative or cultural level. What’s more, this brand of American mythology presents a peculiar paradox in American place-making and presents particular challenges for creating and sustaining an American sense of place, as Didion’s revisionist frontier work, *Where I was From*, so adroitly conveys. The urgency of confronting these cultural challenges is best summed up with a quote from Wallace Stegner:

> In the old days, in blizzardy weather, we used to tie a string of lariats from house to barn so as to make it from shelter to responsibility and back again. With personal, family, and cultural chores to do, I think we had better rig up such a line between past and present. (Stegner 201)
WORKS CITED


