Exploring the Next Frontier: Vietnam, NASA, Star Trek and Utopia in 1960s and 1970s American Myth and History

Review Number: 2017

Publish date: Thursday, 10 November, 2016

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ISBN: 9781138188570

Date of Publication: 2016

Price: £98.96

Pages: 238pp.

Publisher: Routledge

Publisher url: <https://www.routledge.com/Exploring-the-Next-Frontier-Vietnam-NASA-Star-Trek-and-Utopia-in-1960s/Kapell/p/book/9781138188570>

Place of Publication: London

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In the late 1960s, argues Matthew Wilhelm Kapell in *Exploring the Next Frontier*, ‘Americanist scholars’ (p. 6) intentionally abandoned the project of analyzing American myth. He identifies three reasons why they did so. Firstly, amid a contemporary ferment of social conflict and challenges to political authority, they came to disdain the concept of a national myth itself as involving an errant and essentially conservative assumption that cultures were static and homogeneous. Myths were no longer to be canonized as somehow impervious to historical change or innocent of the operations of power. Scholars in the field of American Studies sought to reduce the status of myths by dissolving them into the catch-all category of ‘rhetoric’ and by devoting their attention to the sort of narratives – those of subaltern social groups in particular – that now came into view as the shadows cast by the stock characters and the Whiggish dramaturgy of a single national story started to lift. Secondly, these scholars concluded that the distinctive content of American mythic tradition could not survive the Vietnam War. That tradition, exemplified in the frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner, had conceived of the United States as continually regenerated through its experience of expansion; with each advance westward towards the Pacific coast, Americans were forged anew in the crucible of encounter with untamed nature and the challenge of composing a civilized society from the elemental praxis of frontier life. But then, having reached the Pacific and vaulted across it, Americans eventually met their match in the forces of the Vietnamese revolution; losing badly, it was not civilization they wrought, but a desolation, most notoriously in the settlement they called My Lai. The moral and operational failures in Vietnam, Kapell observes, ‘would seem to permanently scar America’s frontier mythology’ (p. 3). Thirdly, he argues, the interdisciplinary tradition of American Studies itself was being deconstituted at this time, with historians splitting off to write granular archive-based accounts of hitherto neglected social groups or localities, leaving the field in the hands of literary scholars who, under the influence of European theory, were more interested in the endless improvisations and vicissitudes of rhetoric than in the constructive cultural uses that had been made, and might still be made, of older mythic discourses. The effort of an earlier generation of scholars in American Studies – known as the ‘Myth and Symbol’ school – to identify a common cultural inheritance in the mythic poetry of the frontier thesis was now regarded as ‘anathema’ (p.

39). According to Kapell, 'most studies of "myth" itself would become verboten in academe' (p. 6).

The repudiation of myth as a legitimate subject of enquiry within American Studies, Kapell asserts, has persisted to the present day. He believes its effects have been pernicious. At the same moment in the late 1960s that, across sectors of academe, myth was being cast as an intellectual anachronism, new experiments were taking place throughout American culture which drew inspiration from the frontier tradition as they imagined alternative, socially progressive visions of the human future. But, as scholars have observed their ommertà on the theme of myth, the significance of these experiments as creative reconditionings of the Turner thesis for post-Vietnam America have been almost entirely ignored. This was true, Kapell suggests, even in the scholarly field that would have been the obvious staging-post from which to begin such enquiries: the New Western History has been so concerned to bury the corpse of the Turner thesis under the weight of empirical studies that establish the West as a distinctive zone of societal conflict, aggressive resource extraction and racial conquest that its practitioners have devoted little attention to the continued evocations of the thesis in contemporary American culture. The costs that issue from the myopic hostility of Americanist scholars to the concept of national myth are, for Kapell, not just intellectual. By denying the validity of any analytical program 'that leaves open the possibility of there ever being a "whole,"' these scholars 'endeavor to Balkanize not only their field but also the nation-state that is the United States' (p. 11).

Let us place that last striking claim to one side for the moment, and consider the rest. Kapell is correct to see the early 1970s as a wintry season for the Myth and Symbol school. Turner's interpretation of the frontier and of its formative role in American development already had been abraded by a succession of critiques.⁽¹⁾ Indeed, the exemplary text of the Myth and Symbol school – Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* – had itself pointed out that Turner's lyrical language often obscured the distinction between the real and the ideal, and questioned the power of his agrarian romanticism to speak usefully to the experiences of a modern industrial society.⁽²⁾ But it was also evident that Smith and his peers, writing their works near the high noon of the American Century, saw nothing especially invidious in the cultural nationalism of their sources; they did not reflect very expansively on the consequences of a westering ideology for native peoples who had lived in that 'virgin' land long before it became a frontier; nor did they theorize with much rigour how it might be decided what was mythic and what was not. There were good reasons for graduate students in the 1970s to score such texts with objections and rebukes.

Yet, was it really the case, as Kapell asserts, that 'there seemed to be no possibility of adjusting the Myth and Symbol school's methodology for new analyses based on myth' (p. 41)? *Virgin Land* continued to feature on graduate reading lists, whilst sympathetic reappraisals of its broad approach were published periodically throughout the 1970s and 1980s.⁽³⁾ Kapell tells us nothing about the emerging field of film studies, which owed at least a measure of intellectual debt to European critics enthralled by the western form; indeed, it was in the early 1970s that American scholars started to produce their own sustained mythographic readings of the genre.⁽⁴⁾ Around the same time, as Kapell acknowledges, Richard Slotkin delivered the first volume of his seminal trilogy of studies exploring the origins and evolution of American frontier mythology, and Annette Kolodny revealed how American writers had persistently deployed the 'image system of a feminine landscape' to either romanticize the natural world of the frontier or – upon the entrance of machines – to lament its violation.⁽⁵⁾ In addition, it is not self-evident that the New Western Historians – when they strutted into town in the mid-1980s – were determined to enforce a regime of incuriosity about the persistence of Turnerian tropes within American culture. 'Frontier', declared Patricia Nelson Limerick in *The Legacy of Conquest*, her mission statement for the field, 'is an unsubtle concept in a subtle world. Even so, the idea of the frontier is obviously worth studying as a historical artefact. The idea played an enormous role in national behavior'. She observed that it continued to be influential, citing President Reagan's evocation of 'the American sound' in his second inaugural address: 'a settler pushes west and sings his song, and the song echoes out forever and fills the unknowing air'.⁽⁶⁾ And certainly, by millennium's end, no-one interested in the enduring power of frontier themes could reasonably gaze at American historiography, now lightly irrigated by the methods of the 'new cultural history', and proclaim it to be a desert, drained dry of mythographic analysis.⁽⁷⁾ Not every Americanist scholar after Vietnam confused an interest in the cultural career of the Turner thesis with an intellectual endorsement of the thesis

itself.

What then of the cultural experiments that Kapell identifies as disclosing the continued symbolic potential of the frontier narrative even as the nation, in the late 1960s, seemed to hit a wall and break apart? All four of Kapell's case studies – Joe Haldeman's 1974 science fiction novel *The Forever War*, NASA's Apollo missions, the three seasons of *Star Trek* broadcast between 1966 and 1969, and Gerard O'Neill's elaborate blueprint for a chain of space colonies sharing the moon's orbital path around the Earth – involve frontier dramas staged in a cosmic setting. Perhaps these efforts of translation to the extra-terrestrial realm did indeed affirm that the Turner thesis, against the desiccating revisionism of American academe, remained a guide and inspiration as the country lighted out for new horizons – this time, genuinely unbounded ones. Or perhaps they better embodied a final desperate projection, like that of the ruined pioneer, stranded on a Pacific shore, imagining that the route to paradise lay through the depths of the churning sea.

A persuasive resolution of that question is not to be found within the covers of *Exploring the Next Frontier*. Kapell's argument that the frontier myth survived as a cultural resource despite the social and moral crisis of the Vietnam era is not necessarily wrong, but it receives oddly strangled support from his chosen case studies. Haldeman's *Forever War*, as Kapell acknowledges, was directed towards the subversion, rather than the renovation, of science fiction's standard frontier tropes. For the astronauts of the Apollo programme, he notes, the encounter with the arid, pock-marked moon chilled the expectation that the reachable cosmos was abundant with fresh, green breasts of real estate, pliant to the will of a new generation of rocket-assisted pioneers. He only briefly alludes to the conspicuous survival of a homesteading theme in NASA's public rhetoric into the era of the space shuttle.⁽⁸⁾ Kapell's account of the original *Star Trek* series, meanwhile, examines its regular recycling of a plot in which the crew of the *Enterprise*, delivered into the midst of an apparently paradisiacal frontier world, ultimately unmask the dystopian realities underpinning its social order. In its consistent puncturing of Edenic visions, *Star Trek*, he suggests, reflected the 'mythic exhaustion' of American culture in the late 1960s. (p. 163) So the evidence offered by Kapell for the residual power of Turner's ideas to shape optimistic anticipations of the human future is really restricted to a single example: that of O'Neill and his proposal for colonies in space, first conceived in 1969 and subsequently developed in his 1976 book *The High Frontier*. Kapell's exegesis of O'Neill's writings is quite illuminating, but he provides no sustained analysis of how those writings were received, which is surely the most significant test of whether frontier imaginings could still express the aspirations of American audiences even in an 'age of limits'. O'Neill's cylindrical model of an orbital colony continues to excite discussion across the caucus of space enthusiasts and is frequently evoked in works of science fiction – most notably, in the 2014 film *Interstellar* – but this particular cosmic frontier seems no closer to being opened than it did four decades ago. The shuttles – O'Neill's preferred means of wagoning pioneers to the new settlements in space – used up their lives in the service of other causes. In the 1970s and 1980s, it was the Soviet Union, not the United States, which committed itself most fully to the goal of establishing an enduring human outpost in orbit above the Earth.

Kapell's themes are worth exploring, so it is a real shame that he has not written a more polished and persuasive book. His allegations of scholarly neglect are too extravagant; his argument is knotted with contradictions; and his prose is not good company. Irritation subsides at length into fatalism as the reading eye keeps snagging on graceless stuff like this: 'When a fully current understanding of what contemporary first class scholars of myth mean when they examine their topic [*sic*], a deeper and polysemous understanding of the many American "myths of the frontier" can also be considered' (p. 48). And this: 'Any use of myth or frontiers became exclusively used to argue for the intellectual bankruptcy of previous models' (p. 37). The chore of careful proof-reading has been evaded somewhere in the production process. Kapell is not the first student of American culture to be concerned about its 'disuniting', but it is hard – at this particular point in the nation's history – to rate 'Americanist academics' (p. 2) as a fissuring force more powerful than institutional racism, inequalities of wealth and opportunity, and intensifying public controversies over the role of the state. And if the ideal of the coherent whole is so important, let it also be honoured as a principle in the composition of our books.

Notes

1. See, for example, a number of the essays included in George Rogers Taylor, ed., *The Turner Thesis: Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History* (Boston, MA, 1949).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA, 1970), pp. 250–60.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See, for example, Cecil F. Tate, *The Search for a Method in American Studies*, (Minneapolis, MN, 1973), pp. 47–64; Alan Trachtenberg, 'Myth, history, and literature in *Virgin Land*', *Prospects*, 3 (1978), 125–33; and Guenter H. Lenz, 'American Studies – beyond the crises? Recent redefinition and the meaning of theory, history, and practical criticism', *Prospects*, 7 (1982), 53–113.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. André Bazin, 'The Western, or the American film par excellence', in Bazin, *What is Cinema?* (vol. 2, Berkeley, CA, 1971), pp. 140–8; John Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green, OH, 1970); and Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley, CA, 1975).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Norman, OK, 1973); Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*, (Chapel Hill, NC, 1975).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, (New York, NY, 1987), pp. 25, 324.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Examples include: Robert G. Athearn, *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America*, (Lawrence, KS, 1986); John Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York, NY, 1986); Beverly J. Stoeltje, 'Making the frontier myth: folklore process in a modern nation', *Western Folklore*, 46, 4 (1987), 235–53; Harold Schechter and Jonna G. Semeiks, 'Leatherstocking in 'Nam: *Rambo*, *Platoon*, and the American Frontier myth', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 24, 4 (1991), 17–25; John Mack Faragher, *Daniel Boone: The Life and Legend of an American Pioneer* (New York, NY, 1992); Reuben J. Ellis, 'The American Frontier and the contemporary real estate advertising magazine', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 27, 3 (1993), 119–33; and *The Frontier in American Culture*, ed. James R. Grossman (Berkeley, CA, 1994). See also, more recently, David Wrobel, *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West* (Lawrence, KS, 2002); and Michael L. Johnson, *Hunger for the Wild: America's Obsession with the Untamed West*, (Lawrence, KS, 2009).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. For a fuller discussion of this point, see James Spiller, 'Nostalgia for the right stuff: astronauts and public anxiety about a changing nation', in *Spacefarers: Images of Astronauts and Cosmonauts in the Heroic Era of Spaceflight*, ed. Michael J. Neufeld (Washington, DC, 2013), pp. 57–80.[Back to \(8\)](#)

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