The Significance of the Frontier Complex in American History

Oh give me a home where the buffalo roam,
Where the deer and the antelope play,
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word,
And the sky is not cloudy all day.

Brewster Higley, 1873

The winter wind howled as the Indians crept slowly toward the edge of the stockade military fort. From the blockhouse came the muffled scream of the night watch as his Indian assailant took his life with the quiet of a knife. Red Cloud cupped his hands and blew the faint call of a morning dove—the sign to take the fort. War Eagle led a waiting pack of Indians through the gate only to be met with the ferocious blast of a cannon followed by a volley of bullets. Sergeant Thomas had anticipated this late-night attack and preemptively loaded the cannon before dusk. The Indians responded with ear-piercing war cries as they raised their hatchets to the air and sprang upon the mounted cavalry. Drawn swords and rifles met the bows and arrows and clubs as the warriors breached the stockade. The battle might have gone on for hours, but just before Fort Apache was taken, a great string of pops were heard—pop-pop, pop, pop-pop, pop, pop—interrupting the fierce battle.

The smell of popcorn hung heavy in the air as we succumbed to the temptation of the buttery afternoon snack. And so my friends and I would while away many winter hours inhabiting the imagined space of the Wild West frontier, immersing ourselves in what I now refer to as the frontier complex. Today, when I inspect the action figures that came with the popular play sets that entranced generations for decades, such as Fort Apache and Fort Cheyenne, several features stand out. Most obvious, there are no
women. This action is clearly only for the men to decide. Second, the postures presented by the characters make it hard to imagine how any of them could be used to construct a diorama depicting peaceful diplomacy. Instead, savage Indians paw the ground with raised hatchets, bows are drawn taut by arrows ready to fly, and clubs twirl in time to a frenetic war dance. Their opponents hold the tools of advancing civilization—rifles—and ride on saddled horses, not bareback, and hats, not feathers, adorn the men’s heads. In contrast to the Indians, with their stylized tipi and totem pole, the soldiers stand uniformed and poised in their fortified structure, with their refined instruments of military prowess; these are not mere natural objects of rocks and sticks fashioned into crude weapons, shelter, and objects of worship.

The social history of the Wild West American frontier was of course much more complex and nuanced than the binary possibilities contained in such egregiously essentializing toys and in their counterpart narratives told in pulp fiction, on television shows, and on the movie screen. Regardless of medium, these popular, iconic representations of the Wild West frontier continue to constitute a “frontier complex” in our national imagination. In addition to being created in fiction, the frontier complex takes material
forms that are visited by millions of domestic and foreign tourists each year. They view the frontier complex in places ranging from the fantastical at Disneyland’s Frontierland on the Pacific coast to the campy Frontier Town Campground near Ocean City, Maryland; from the OK Corral in Tombstone, Arizona, to the reconstructed Front Street of the quintessential 1870s cowboy town of Dodge City, Kansas; and from Deadwood, South Dakota, to the infamous Hanging Judge Isaac Parker’s reconstructed gallows in Fort Smith, Arkansas. Many visitors come to these sites expecting to see the real-life highlight reel from the Fort Apache play set, and many sites cater to that expectation. This frontier complex is one of many “tourism imaginaries” that are the direct and intended result of decades of the consciously planned “tourismification” of the Wild West frontier.2

The frontier complex is a companion concept to Tony Horowitz’ Confederates in the Attic. Horowitz shows that by perpetually reenacting the Civil War on a life-size theatrical stage, many Americans are able to act out pent-up frustration and anger while working through felt grievances from the past up through today. Likewise, “frontiers in the attic” represents a mental and physical space in which to work out fears and anxieties that are not necessarily grounded in reality. As “attic” might connote a pathology, “fantasy” may be a better descriptor. The key difference between the Confederate and frontier attics is that in the case of the frontier there was and is a clear victor: white Anglo men definitively won claims to property and power as each frontier space was bent to the will of manifest destiny.

Reenacting the frontier inherently re-creates a unifying win for America and specifically for white Americans. Reenacting the Civil War, despite the facts in the matter, does not provide as clear a resolution for all the involved white social actors. Despite the racialized legacy of white Anglos, British, Spanish, and French supplanting legions of Indian groups on the leading edge of the frontier for centuries, somehow the frontier complex is not performed within as racially charged a context as the Civil War. Consequently, it is purveyed as a more socially acceptable landscape in which one can find city leaders publicly boasting about their heritage in unison—a very white heritage.

Heritage, Cultural Memory, and Myth

The ever-rolling wave of the frontier border that spread from east to west in the nation’s history enables virtually every state in the Union, and any city within it, to lay claim to some point in time in which it sat squarely
on the border of the frontier. This imagined moment in history creates a
marker between an advancing western civilization on one side of it and a
wild savagery that lay beyond it. Annual Frontier Days, also called Pioneer
Days or Founders Days, thus function as an origin myth for communities
as they tell the tale of how white Anglo-Saxon settlers came to dominate
the landscape.

Such events can be found across the country from Steubenville, Ohio,
to Arlington Heights, Illinois; Wetumpka, Alabama; Charlotte, Michigan;
Cheyenne, Wyoming; and Willits, California. Practically every state is host
to such an event. As such, this frontier complex resides in the nation’s col-
lective psyche, in its attic. It provides a simplified, overarching narrative
history of the nation that selectively remembers and portrays some details
as it conveniently forgets others. This practice of “silencing the past” and
“imagineering otherness” is embodied in many popular conceptions of cul-
tural heritage.3

The narratives for cultural heritage tourism in the frontier complex are
frequently attached to historical places or artifacts from the middle to late
nineteenth century. While they are presented to the public as historically
impeccable, in fact they are often reproducing fictionalized, sensational-
ized, impeachable accounts of the frontier past.4 In The Heritage Crusade
and the Spoils of History, David Lowenthal observes, “In fact, heritage is
not history at all; while it borrows from and enlivens historical study, heri-
tage is not an inquiry into the past but a celebration of it, not an effort to
know what actually happened but a profession of faith in a past tailored
to present-day purposes.”5 Though quite different, heritage and history are
consistently interwoven in tourist discourses.

In practice, the frontier complex emerges from this process of mixing
contemporary imaginings of what the frontier was like with historical and
material artifacts from a specific period to create ostensibly authentic re-
productions for tourists to consume. In other words, it is created in the
process that is commonly thought to be describing it. The frontier complex
is performed into existence and maintained both materially and mentally
through this perpetual interaction.6 It manifests materially in buildings,
monuments, and artifacts that can be visited and seen in reconstructed
log stockade forts, blacksmith shops, historic homes, gallows, and covered
wagons. The frontier complex takes mental shape in the ideas and memo-
ries with which the material forms are imbued through spoken, visual, and
textual interpretations that represent contemporary ideologies of power,
class, gender, and race. The primary narrative of the frontier complex mini-
mizes the devastating consequences that imperialism, racism, and sexism
have had on social minorities in the past and still today as it elevates and
legitimizes the privilege bestowed to white men past and present.

Heritage thus creates a selective and exaggerated cultural memory in
which flesh-and-blood mortals are turned into legends, just beyond normal
human abilities, and facts take wing and fly to mythic heights, often beyond
common sense, yet frequently are believed nonetheless. In Remembering the
Alamo, Richard Flores suggests that it is difficult to tease out the difference
between the historical facts and the mythic narrative that shapes cultural
memory because “cultural memory refers to those aspects of memory that
exist outside of official historical discourse, yet are ‘entangled’ with them.”7
Grounded in grains of truth, life is breathed into myths by their perpetual
performance, and as Roland Barthes argues, these myths become “deeply
grounded narratives through which communities express their heartfelt
convictions.”8 Myths therefore are not precisely fallacies; they convey the
felt truths of the lived social experience for those who believe them. It is
this variety of mythic narratives that converts history into the cultural
memory and heritage found in the frontier attic.

The Wild West frontier complex is particularly adept at creating mythic
narratives and wrapping them in the protective cloak of heritage. In order
to untangle facts from heritage, cultural memory, and myths, they must be
grounded in historical context. A general sketch of the American western
frontier will allow us to measure the disconnection between the historical
record and popular tourist narratives.

**Frontier Complex**

The frontier complex under discussion here is of a particular variety, and
observations of it may not be true of other frontier regions. Frontier en-
vvironments are found all over the world and can come from any direction
on the compass.9 The specific frontier complex in question stems from cir-
cumstances set in motion after the 1803 Louisiana Purchase and continuing
until Oklahoma statehood in 1907, in lands spanning from the Mississippi
River to the Rocky Mountains. It is from this time and region that many
of the iconic American images in the popular imagination of cowboys, In-
dians, wagon trains, and military forts are derived. The frontier of the Old
Northwest Territory, for example, may share some of these attributes, but
that specific frontier is not the focus of this study.10 Nor do I claim this
work to be an exhaustive inquiry into the hundreds of forts, battles, and campaigns west of the Mississippi.¹¹

What follows is a template of five frontier eras that I will use to examine how the frontier complex has been exploited for different purposes throughout American history. This model is a modified version of that found in Robert Frazer’s *Forts of the West*.¹² The precise time frames are slightly different from Frazer’s, and I have added two more periods to bring the stages of the frontier complex up to the present time. None of these five time frames has a hard and fast beginning or ending. They are general time frames that in some cases overlap.

The first three time frames relate to Indian removal (1804–1848), restraint (1848–1887), and reservation (1887–1934). Over the course of these three periods the US Army was employed to clear the path for white immigrants inspired by a succession of economic bonanzas, prominently fur, grazing land, gold and silver, timber, railroads, coal, and homesteads. The history that unfolded in the first three periods was converted into new riches, as popular entertainment for tourists in the recreation period (1920–1980); those efforts were redoubled (1980–present) in drastically altered national and global economies.

The recreation period that began in the 1920s saw a burst of tourism within the frontier complex. This era of converting nineteenth-century military forts and westward trails into twentieth-century tourist attractions began in earnest with the advent of affordable automobiles and grew in tandem with the explosion of western films and television shows after World War II. The fifth period, of redoubling, began in response to a shift in economic policies typically discussed as neoliberalism, globalization, and deindustrialization that resulted in the loss of manufacturing jobs and a decline in middle-class families’ disposable incomes for summer vacations.

Given the economic shift, producers of frontier-complex tourism faced two new dilemmas: well-established tourist sites had to attract new tourists who had less money to spend than generations before them, and cities desperate to fill the economic void caused by losses in the manufacturing sector became more reliant on cultural heritage tourism to improve otherwise eroding tax bases. Compounding this economic crisis was a heightened competition within the tourism sector of the economy as an effect of the Reagan era of deregulation. As a result of the 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, Indian gaming from bingo halls to casinos burst onto the