*Who Does Americanness Belong To?:*

Deviance as the New American Frontier

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The semantic difference between the words "border" and "frontier" in the American imagination is solely defined by the person who wields it. One threatens those who approach; one welcomes them. One is imposed; one is imagined. One is paranoid of the unknown; one sees it as a world of opportunity and possibility. In a country that celebrates the conquest of frontier while simultaneously enforcing borders, one must ask themselves how notions of the frontier and borders affect Americanness, physically and non-physically.

I argue that the border/frontier dichotomy in the American imagination limits the accessibility of "Americanness." A border keeps out not only people, but new ideas as well; it limits cultural and societal change by policing what kind of change is allowed. The frontier, on the other hand, implies control and conquest of the unknown. However, I also argue that if one were to adopt deviance, uncertainty, and fluidity as "the new frontier," the centrality of the "frontier" in the American imagination certainly has potential to empower the marginalized and make "Americanness" accessible to all. I will explore "The Significance of the American Frontier in American History," or "the Frontier Thesis," by Frederick J. Turner and *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* by Gloria E. Anzaldúa to provide the framework with which we can interpret the symbolic and literal implications of the frontier and of borders.

The physical implications of the American frontier and American borders are more straightforward to interpret. In her book, Anzaldúa immediately describes the U.S.-Mexican border as "una herida abierta," or an open wound, "where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds." Borders "define the places that are safe and unsafe,” in order “to distinguish us from them"[[1]](#footnote-1). She passionately illuminates the nonconsensual, violent nature of borders by imbuing her own voice with language that communicates tragedy, hurt, and pain. This reinforces the notion that borders are set to keep people out of the United States.

This is not far flung from the description of the general term, “frontier,” that Turner introduces at the beginning of his thesis. He describes the concept of the frontier, as “the meeting point between savagery and civilization,” as he acknowledges that the frontier had been previously studied, at the time of his writing in 1893, “from the point of view of border warfare and the chase.”[[2]](#footnote-2) However, Turner goes on to differentiate the *American* frontier, in particular, as at the “hither edge of free land,” due to the fact it is sparsely populated, unlike the European frontier. Turner’s primary argument is meant to differentiate the American frontier, by outlining that the ways in which Americans interacted with the land, shaped a uniquely American character, stripping colonial men of their Europeanness as they braved the frontier. His language and tone suggests something romantic about the struggle of man against the frontier, explaining that it is “the line of most rapid and effective Americanization,” where “wilderness masters the colonist”[[3]](#footnote-3). Navigating the frontier and adapting one’s practices, identity, and values to accommodate the frontier, according to Turner, is what is what defines an American.

These two definitions of these two different kinds of boundaries illustrate that the presence of an opposition to the American identity creates the distinction between a border and a frontier. Anzaldúa’s account is written from the perspective of those who could potentially threaten the American identity and thus are shut out by a border. Turner, on the other hand, emphasizes the room for opportunity and growth that the frontier may provide in the development of the American identity. A border restricts change, while the frontier facilitates it. This introduces the peculiar, nonphysical effects of a physical boundary: how physical manifestations, reinforcements, and expressions of boundaries influence and are influenced by nonphysical ideas.

Anzaldúa describes the experience of those living in the physical borderlands at the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border. Furthermore, she takes that concept of a “borderland” and analogizes it to psychological, sexual, and spiritual borderlands that people all over the world must navigate within themselves.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Borderlands are “wherever two or more cultures edge each other,” “where people of different races occupy the same territory,” and where socioeconomic classes touch.[[5]](#footnote-5) There exist borders of gender, sexuality, spirituality, race, ethnicity, language, and culture that one must navigate. Describing herself as a “border woman,” she describes the borderlands as a “place of contradictions,” and a landscape where “hatred, anger, and exploitation are prominent features”[[6]](#footnote-6).

There exist a number reasons as to why Anzaldúa chose to utilize the word “border,” and not frontier. Americanness and the freedom to a safe, fluid existence is not afforded to “border people” due to the imposed lines drawn not only between American and non-American cultures, but also drawn within the binaries and categories that are accepted in the American imagination, such as those within race, gender, sexuality, spirituality. The othering of those who do not live within certain categories that add up to define the ideal American identity (i.e. white, heterosexual, cisgender male) are traditionally discriminated against to some degree. Furthermore, those who do not adhere to these categories at all, by existing in more than one at the same time, as Anzaldúa describes, are ultimately alienated. The gravitation of Americans to borders– as it conflates to categories, binaries, and labels– limits the possibility of Americanness for many people.

However, Turner’s Frontier Thesis does provide a semblance of hope. I argue that the centrality of the frontier in the American imagination could provide the framework and enthusiasm necessary to navigate these nonphysical borders of identity. Turner begins his essay in mourning of the frontier, as the bulletin of the Superintendent of the Census for 1890 declared, “at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that

there could hardly be said to be a frontier line.” Turner then claims this to be the “closing of a great historic movement”[[7]](#footnote-7). At the end of his thesis, he wistfully described the era of the frontier, with “the gift of such free land,” as a time where “the bonds of custom are broken and unrestraint are triumphant,” and that each frontier “furnished a new field of opportunity” and provides “a gate of escape from the bondage of the past”[[8]](#footnote-8). I argue that Americans who live in the psychological, sexual, racial, ethnic, and spiritual Borderlands of identity live here, on a frontier that Turner describes, and are navigating the nonphysical frontier of identity. Deviance from traditional categories of identity could be adopted as the new frontier as a way to imbue the existence and validity of these identities into the American imagination.

One could argue that it is not the duty of the American imagination to adopt those who exist at the borders. Anzaldúa poses an identity called “the new mestiza,” who “copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions” and “a tolerance for ambiguity”[[9]](#footnote-9). The new mestiza adopts a “plural personality” and “operates in a pluralistic mode,” with nothing “thrust out,” “rejected,” “or abandoned,” as she mobilizes ambivalence whilst sustaining contradictions[[10]](#footnote-10). However, as powerful as the new mestiza is, she also continues to explain the emotional labor of the mestiza consciousness, as she must craft an element of the self that is “greater than the sum of its severed parts,” an action could be “an intense source of pain”[[11]](#footnote-11). She states that one the day “the future will belong to the mestiza,” because “future depends on the breaking down of paradigms”[[12]](#footnote-12). This rhymes with Turner’s claim that “American development” does not merely advance linearly, but rather that social development begins over and over again, returning to primitive conditions, on “a continually advancing frontier line; he calls it a “perennial rebirth” and the “fluidity of American life”[[13]](#footnote-13). Both authors argue for societal change to support the deviation of individuals from norms and the fluidity of social development.

The adoption of deviance and fluidity of identity as the new frontier, ultimately omitting the paradigm of a border, has the potential to reframe the breaches and trespasses of boundaries committed by border people as explorations of the unknown. The framework of the frontier provides an opportunity to complicate current discourse around these boundaries regarding gender, sexuality, spirituality, and more. Names of current categories could denote sides of a spectrum, or even areas of an ultimate nonphysical landscape that symbolizes where different identities coincide, interact, and conflict. The current terminology of the border/frontier dichotomy does not belong to border people or the new mestiza, but rather those who impose borders in fear of change. Perhaps Turner would interpret this fear of change and paranoia against the unknown as a sign that a new frontier is due and that the American consciousness must grow. Perhaps the marginalized can wield the symbol of the frontier to reclaim Americanness for themselves as the American identity is forced to interrogate itself. Wilderness mastering the colonist[[14]](#footnote-14) and an accommodation of the unknown– the frontier and its landscape– does lie at the center of the American identity, after all.

Bibliography

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1. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco : Spinsters/Aunt Lute Book Company, 1987), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier Thesis in American History” (1893), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Preface. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mesitza*, 79 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 79-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)