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From Maps to Myth:
The Census, Turner, and the Idea of the Frontier

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One thing you will discover
When you get next to one another
Is everybody needs some elbow room.
Elbow room!

Oh elbow room, elbow room,
Gotta, gotta get us some elbow room.
It's the West or bust, in God we trust.
There's a new land out there.
–Ahrens 1973

"Elbow Room," an early 1970s animated musical short in the ABC children's television series *Schoolhouse Rock*, tells the story of America's settlement in under four hundred words and four minutes. *Schoolhouse Rock* first ran from 1973 to 1985. It aired between popular Saturday-morning cartoons and helped teach millions of children the basics of Western history. Popular demand recently revived it, and it has become part of twenty- and thirtysomething culture. Time Warner made it available for sale in 1996. As an electronic fable, "Elbow Room" concisely narrates Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis. It depicts America's westward expansion as fated:

The way was opened up for folks with bravery.
There were plenty of fights to win land rights,
But the West was meant to be.

Even Turner's Victorian-era concept of inevitably advancing civilization appears in "Elbow Room." One sequence shows foot trails becoming wagon tracks, railroads and then highways. A national map emerges, webbed with Interstates.[1] "Elbow Room" voices a similarly Turnerian succession:

The trappers, traders and the peddlers,
The politicians and the settlers,
They got there by any way they could,
Any way they could.

The gold rush trampled down the wilderness,
The railroads spread across from east to west
And soon the West was opened up,
Opened up for good.

Turner's master narrative of Western history lives on in *Schoolhouse Rock*. Few other major historical works or historians reach so deep into popular culture. It is hard to imagine, say, a cartoon version of Charles Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*. But how exactly did Turner's frontier thesis, initially an academic address, become part of America's mythology? What made it eventually the stuff of Saturday-morning cartoons?[2] Historians have by now pored over such questions (see, for example, White, *Frontier*, or the classic Smith 250-60). Yet the answer remains elusive.

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The New Western Historians, for instance, the contemporary intellectual group perhaps most deeply engaged with Turner's legacy—and frustrated by it—for a time challenged the frontier thesis directly. Patricia Nelson Limerick, one of the most prominent of the group, described the frontier as "an unsubtle concept in a subtle world" (*Legacy* 25). She called the frontier "the other f-word" and avoided its use in the classroom (*Frontier* 72, 78). Even so, one could arguably read her *Legacy of Conquest* as an extended essay on the frontier and its impact on American life simply by substituting the word "frontier" for her term conquest. Similarly, Richard White (*"It's Your Misfortune"*) wrote a major text on Western history without mentioning Turner. According to Donald Worster, "Turner presides over western history like a Holy Ghost . . . [h]eads still bowed dutifully at the name Frederick Jackson Turner, and a few still crossed themselves in reverence" (quoted in Faragher 107). The New Western Historians demonstrate Turner's extraordinary grip and persistence for American history. (See Steiner and Flores for a discussion of their positions.)

We believe the explanation for Turner's power lies in the way in which he joined apparently divergent traditions of knowledge to simultaneously invigorate, modernize, and mythologize the concept of the frontier. In particular, he tied the Census Office's carefully empirical frontier to a more Durkheimian interpretive collective concept. This essay traces the intellectual and social links between the Census's use of the frontier as a specific bureaucratic land category and Turner's broader approach to the concept. The term "frontier" had resonated for the public long before the Census and Turner (Juricek). A sizable frontier literature—geological surveys, histories, biographies, booster pamphlets, emigrant's guides, and dime novels—predated the Census's work. For example, there were nearly a dozen biographies of Daniel Boone by the 1880s (Miner). This literature produced a well-developed myth of the pioneer that suffused later scholarly depictions of the frontier, especially Turner's. But the 1870 Census sparked the frontier's technical interpretation by formalizing the concept. The public's frontier of romantic possibility, of open-ended opportunity and adventure, became the Census's analytic frontier of quantifiable progress. Near the end of the nineteenth century the two perspectives were mostly separate. Turner's contribution—his genius—came in uniting these apparently divergent traditions and broadening them further. Turner selectively used Census findings for his more speculative project, whose results flowed directly into the American mind.

We show how this process occurred. More precisely, we document an American myth—a collective belief that may never have been literally true but will always be psychically gripping—in its transition stage. Myths offer metaphorical guides to a society's values, showing how a culture answers its key questions. They depict an imagined past while structuring an equally imagined present and future. In American society the frontier myth presents what Henry Nash Smith calls a "master symbol" (123). Michael Kammen (11-12 and 194-227) views the period between 1870 and 1910 as an era when Americans agreed to link their identity to their past; they elevated collective memory into national self-conception. Turner's myth-making was a key part of the transformation. In the decades before Turner, research on the frontier centered primarily on its material qualities. After him many historians and the nation focused on its social meaning—what Turner called its significance.[3]

We start by exploring the formulation of the Census's frontier, looking at the political and institutional forces that prompted the office's interest. Then we consider how Turner advanced his myth, probing the events and ideological trends that helped him transmute the Census's frontier from a place to a metaphor. We show how in a time of national crisis Turner drew on the Census to provide much-needed scholarly support for America's yeoman-agricultural myth. He broadened the frontier myth by creating a more flexible, inclusive version of it: the frontier thesis that permanently changed academic and popular thought.

The Census: Mapping the Frontier

The post-Civil War Census Office gave Turner the technical underpinnings for his frontier. Led by two noted scholars, Francis Walker and Henry Gannett, the Census shifted much of its research emphasis from counting slaves to charting national settlement. Walker, who as the bureau's superintendent in 1870 and 1880 created the modern Census, originated the statistical definition of the frontier (Mood, "Concept" and "Rise"). An economist of international repute, he headed the Interior Department's Bureau of Indian Affairs and was later president of M.I.T. Gannett, the first Census geographer, also worked on the U.S. Geological Survey and served as president of the National Geographic Society.

During Reconstruction the nation refocused on building the West and settling the frontier (Emmons). The 1862 Homestead Act and its successors encouraged Western settlement. The triumphant Republican Party committed to westward growth in its platforms. Walker, Union general and lifelong Republican, promoted this mood and politics by reporting America's westward surge. The rapid completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869 reflected the spirit. As part of a larger governmental effort to fill in the national map's remaining voids, western land surveys led by Ferdinand Hayden, Clarence King, John Wesley Powell, and George Wheeler charted the physical outlines of unsettled places and the Census traced their peopling. Gannett participated in the King survey.

Walker first charted the frontier in the essay "Progress of the Nation," which appeared in his 1874 *Statistical Atlas of the United States*. He defined three major settlement types: wilderness or vacant land—that is, unsettled land—with less than two people per square mile, a density equivalent to present-day San Francisco having no more than 93 residents; frontier or partial settlement, with between two and six people per square mile; and fully settled places, with six or more people per square mile. A frontier line delimited

the western edge of all contiguous east-to-west settlements; it split frontier from wilderness by dividing places with more than two people per square mile from those with fewer.

Walker created the technical concepts of the frontier and the frontier line to track national settlement. Devising them before the 1870s would have been unlikely because the field of statistical cartography barely existed. Improvements in mapmaking revolutionized the depiction of demographic patterns. Mood ("Rise" 217) notes that Walker "must receive the credit for making use of the new technique and applying it in the census reports of 1870."[4] Until 1874 the Census never discussed the frontier, much less calculated its extent or that of the frontier line; the 1870 Census did not mention the frontier but had a map of U.S. population density (Walker, *Compendium* 49). Walker applied his land categories to all prior Censuses, showing in a series of maps the extent of inhabited area for each Census since 1790. He found that in each successive decade the nation occupied a larger settled domain. While much of the West lay "vacant," the progressive incorporation of more acreage implied that the wilderness and frontier were fated for American occupancy. By drawing a frontier line around vacant land, Walker put it at the bottom of a settlement hierarchy that extended all the way up to the urban Northeast. His maps depicted settlement with a distinctly nineteenth-century Euroamerican twist: until the 1890 Census, only taxpaying Indians (sometimes referred to as civilized Indians in Census description) counted.[5] Thus many large stable Indian settlements appeared vacant, while ephemeral white towns or mining camps seemed settled. Walker surveyed the West as an Anglo appraiser.

In 1875, summarizing the 1874 *Statistical Atlas*, Walker traced America's settlement and presented the Census's frontier concept to the public in *Harper's Monthly*, the predecessor of today's *Harper's*. He showed settled land more than quintupling, from 239,935 square miles in 1790 to 1,272,239 square miles in 1870. He introduced a new "center of population" measure, intended to locate the midpoint of American population. Walker found that it had migrated across the Appalachians, shifting from the Chesapeake Bay near Baltimore in 1790 to southwestern Ohio, 50 miles east of Cincinnati, by 1870. He estimated the center's westward advance at 70 to 75 feet per day. The depiction suggested that the entire nation shifted westward relatively evenly, but the center's westward shifts after 1840 derived mainly from isolated West Coast growth rather than a smooth, wide-scale advance of settlement (see Lang, Popper and Popper, "Progress" 295, 303-4).

Americans intended eventually to settle the West as densely as they already had the East. They did not want to scatter presidios or trading posts across it; they expected to use it heavily. Americans embraced the evolving Anglo concept of land exemplified in the Utilitarian doctrine of "highest and best use": the rightful occupiers put land to its maximum use (Bentham and Wayland). The essence of civilization lay in an increasing ability to support growing populations. Americans believed that the widely dispersed Spanish missionaries, British fur traders and Indian hunter-gatherers were underexploiting the West.[6] Richard Henry Dana's classic *Two Years before the Mast*, a popular account of an 1830 sea voyage to California, describes Mexicans as "idle, thriftless people" who "make nothing for themselves. . . . [I]n the hands of enterprising people [read: Anglos], what a country this might be!" (Dana 143-44). Yet decades after the Mexican-American War, most of the West remained wilderness in Census terms. Walker and Gannett had to put a positive light on Western land use. Until Americans settled the frontier, the Census needed to explain it away.

A new geography of the West emerged. Earlier Americans had practical interests in Native peoples and in European competitors—for trade, information and at times survival—but by the mid-nineteenth century their settlements impeded Manifest Destiny. Richard White ("Frederick Jackson Turner" 17-19) shows that nineteenth-century Americans often portrayed the West as "largely empty and unknown" ("vacant" to Walker, *Statistical* 3 or "inert" to Turner, "Significance" 15) to avoid the "guilt of conquest." He cites, for example, an 1828 school atlas that left western North America almost blank. As Spanish and Indian lands became targets for expansion, the features on Western maps changed: cartographers began to emphasize physical resources and American outposts. An 1836 map showed Texas full of American land grants and "Immense Level Prairies" (Young).[7] At the outbreak of the Mexican-American War in 1846, the U.S. Army used a map that showed the entire Southwest, including Baja, California, already independent of Mexico and presumably ready to enter the Union (Mitchell). The Census's efforts climaxed a decades-long American reimaging of the West. Its maps marked a shift from explorer's guides as scoping documents, to technical surveys rife with possibility, and then to documentation of the increasingly occupied West. Places not yet settled faced an inex-

orable human tide—what Walker termed the nation's "imperial sweep" (Walker, *Statistical* 3).

As post-Civil War America emerged in world politics, the Census supported the nation's assumption of parity with Europe. For instance, nineteenth-century social scientists like Herbert Spencer linked urbanization to national progress. They associated urbanization's effects, such as a more elaborate division of labor, with a higher evolutionary stage (see, for instance, Spencer, Durkheim, and Coste). Census scholars such as Gannett and Walker thus stratified the nation's land by simple population density:

> Where the population ranges from 6 to 18 to a square mile, agriculture is still practically the only population. . . . With the next group, 18 to 45 to a square mile, manufacturers and commerce have commenced to make some progress among a community essentially devoted to agriculture. . . . In the last two groups, 45 to 90 and 90 and more inhabitants to a square mile, manufacturers and commerce are, relative to agriculture, of great importance, and the people are in large proportion grouped in small towns and cities. (Gannett, "Density" 14)

To Gannett, land that began as frontier might someday have farms or even great cities; in any case it would "improve," in accord with the Victorian notion of progress, and increase the population it could support. But already he hoped Europeans would consider the East their New World counterpart. He explained:

> I was asked not long ago, by a foreigner, "What is the density of settlement in your country?" to which I was obliged the true Yankee rejoinder, "What portion of my country?" The average density of settlement of such a country as this, some parts of which are peopled as fully as the oldest parts of Europe, while great stretches, empires in extent are as yet almost without inhabitants, means nothing, and the question of my friend implied an ignorance. (Gannett, "Settled Area" 70)

To him, America's "settled area is mainly comprised of one large body extending from the Atlantic Ocean westward to the neighborhood of the hundredth meridian. . . . In this body is comprised probably ninety-five percent of [U.S.] population" (Gannett, "Settled Area" 70).[8] By 1880, Eastern density stood at 34 people per square mile. The figure fell below Western Europe's, but was double the nation's average, and the nation's total population was respectable by European standards.[9] Anticipating the day when a fully settled America would overtake Europe, Walker (*Atlantic* 487) noted "the gratifying contemplation of a population exceeding Great Britain, France and Germany combined." (For a general discussion of Gannett and Walker's thinking, see Lang, Popper, and Popper, "Progress.")

But when the American population was divided by its land area, low density resulted. By international standards vast stretches of the late-nineteenth century American West stood nearly empty. The frontier seemed a national embarrassment; the Census felt challenged to make the United States look more advanced. The Census scholars saw America as historically and demographically distinct, a view Turner soon took up and strengthened. For instance, Walker describes settlement as driven by an American pull of opportunity rather than a European push of crowding:

> American migrations are, as far as I know, unique in that they never awaited the day of repletion in familiar seats of population. They were not due to pressure, but were always occasioned by the attractions of a new life in new lands farther to the west. So prompt and energetic was the disposition of the people that they never allowed population fairly to fill up the old fields. (Walker, "Growth" 656)

The nation's low population density thus did not trouble him: he suggested that the link between urbanization and modernity meant less in the United States than in Europe. America's more moderate density allowed it to avoid the problems of European cities, where higher densities meant surplus population. Walker judged American progress by breadth of settlement, not depth. His Census maps proved the point.[10]

The Census's decision to profile the frontier served its own bureaucratic interest. Starting in 1790, the Census operated as a temporary office with the constitutional mission of taking ten-year population counts to apportion the House of Representatives and taxes. Beginning in the 1840s, the Census Office lobbied Congress for permanent status (Wright 79). Census superintendents such as Walker argued that the office's temporary position, combined with patronage-based hiring, distorted the counts (Eckler 8). Walker sensed an American "passion for statistics" (quoted in Schlereth 3). By taking on large-scale, high-profile projects like following the frontier, the Census made a better case for itself. Walker in 1880 formed a Census geography division headed by Gannett. The 1880 and 1890 Censuses compiled more than 200 schedules and asked 13,000 questions on topics ranging from garbage disposal to polygamy (see Schlereth 28).

The emerging American scholarly community contributed greatly to these efforts. Margo Anderson finds the "census itself was a pioneering institution in the creation of modern social science.... [T]he list of men who worked on the 1880 Census reads like a log of the late-19th-century academic elite" (Anderson 6, 99). By the 1890s, professional groups like the American Economic Association and the American Statistical Association urged Congress to institutionalize the Census (Eckler 9 and Wright 82). The Permanent Census Act passed in 1902.

The 1890 Census reprinted Walker's "Progress of the Nation," with statistical updates and more analysis. The Census, celebrating its centennial, encapsulated nineteenth-century settlement with noticeable *jingoism:*

> This census completes the history of a century; a century of progress and achievement unequaled in the world's history.... The century has witnessed our development into a great and powerful nation; it has witnessed the spread of settlement across the continent until not less than 1,947,280 square miles have been redeemed from the wilderness and brought into the service of man. (Porter, Gannett, and Hunt 27)

The Census added what Turner would make its most-quoted passage ever:

> Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled land has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent and its westward movement it can not, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports. (Porter, Gannett, and Hunt 34)[11]

After only two decades of mapping the frontier, the 1890 Census declared it moot. The Census charted the frontier line,[12] but argued that mounting settlement west of it now rendered its location and movement meaningless. Henry Gannett, the 1890 Census's main author,[13] raised a similar point in *National Geographic*:

> The frontier line has disappeared. The settlements in the far west have spread and joined one another. The settlements from the east have traveled up the plains and have joined those in the mountains at many points, so that the settled area has become the rule and the unoccupied places the exception. (Gannett, "Movements" 26. See also Mood, "Concept" 29)

The Census depiction of the frontier had been consistently technical. Walker and Gannett developed the concepts of settled land, the frontier and the frontier line as statistical tools to measure Euroamerican occupancy and the expansion of the American nation-state. Once the concepts became less workable, Walker and Gannett abandoned them. Gannett ("Movements" 26), invoking Horace Greeley, wrote, "It will soon be useless to advise men to go west and grow up with the country, for the country is rapidly growing up."

Turner: Mythologizing the Frontier

The Census's concept of the frontier influenced scholars, particularly Turner. Ray Allen Billington writes of him: "Without the efforts of a generation of statisticians and map makers, who by the 1890s were able to depict the nation's expansion in graphic form, he probably would not have arrived at his thesis.... Turner's concept of economic growth, appearing often in his writings, probably owed something to Gannett's essays" (Billington, *Genesis* 108, 113). Turner "read avidly the writings of Francis A. Walker, [and] pored over Henry Gannett's census contributions on American geography and physiography" (Mood, *Early Writings* 5-6).

Turner adapted a range of facts and theories to suit his needs. Fulmer Mood notes that while "Census scholars had anticipated him in charting the course of westward movement... it was Turner who showed its meaning in manifold ways. He was the historian, thinking" (Mood, *Early Writings* 6). He adds, "The whole drift of Turner's creative activity was opposed to the 'staggering accumulation of unrelated observation.' He wanted *meaning, significance*" (Mood, "Historiographic" 154, emphasis in the original). Mood and many other historians underestimate the Census's sophistication and reach. Walker and Gannett produced highly ambitious thought; their maps and tables represented only part of their work, which also extended to effective popularization. Turner's mission was different, more audacious. He wanted to extend social science, to add a poetic touch that would make him the supreme popularizer and mythologizer.[14]

Turner began by expanding the Census's frontier definition. "In the census reports," he writes, the frontier "is treated as the margin of that settlement which has a density of two or more to the square mile. The term is an elastic one, and for our purposes does not need a sharp definition" (Turner, "Significance" 3). The Census relied on spatial analysis. It gave Turner's frontier a scientific aura to which he could attach

American icons—the yeoman farmer, the covered wagon, Boone at Cumberland Gap. (See White, "Frederick Jackson Turner" 7-65 and Nordholt 137-39 on Turner's iconography.) Turner invoked the Census's profane land category to preserve a sacred metaphor; geographic logic gave way to national symbolism.[15] The metamorphosis has affected—and often driven—the imagery and study of the West for more than a century.

Turner's thesis appeared as the nation faced mounting financial and political troubles (Brands 90-214). Richard Hofstadter ("Manifest Destiny" 173-74) refers to the "psychic crisis of the 1890s," when "a number of singular events . . . converged with depression to heighten its impact on the public mind." In 1893 over 600 banks failed. By 1894 nearly 200 railroads were bankrupt. There were no federal statistics, but at least a quarter of the workforce may have been unemployed. A growing Populist movement pushed for reform; Ohio businessman Jacob Coxey led a march on Washington. Western and Southern agrarian unrest renewed concerns over sectionalism.

The national mood was grim; for the first time since the Civil War Americans faced a test of their core beliefs (Commager 41-54). Turner responded by assuaging their doubts. Billington argues that Turner's "theories were acceptable—and accepted—because they gave substance to folk myths that satisfied the need of Americans for a rose-tinted view of the future" (Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner* 186 and see Bogue 116, 453). Turner systematized a narrative that Americans already understood; the elements of the frontier thesis had deep roots in the popular imagination. Referring to Turner, James Malin concludes, "[t]he great are the beneficiaries of folk processes and are probably seldom so much true creators as channels through which the folk process finds its fullest expression in explicit language which makes it a matter of record" (Malin 67-68 and see Benson, "Historian").

Turner's 1893 essay got little notice when he first read it before the American Historical Association in Chicago, but the subsequent academic response inspired him to seek a wider audience (Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner* 184-208 and Bogue 113-18). By early 1896 the *Atlantic Monthly* approached Turner, asking him to use the frontier thesis to explain the nation's growing Populist movement. A critical presidential election loomed pitting Ohio Republican William McKinley against Nebraska Democrat William Jennings Bryan. John Garraty writes: "Seldom have the two great parties divided so clearly on fundamental issues; a showdown was inevitable; a major turning point in American history had been reached. . . . City against countryside, industry against agriculture, East against South and West, the 19th century against the 20th—these were the real contestants in 1896" (Garraty 151). Bryan's nomination had shocked many middle-class Easterners—the bulk of the *Atlantic*'s readers and natural anti-Populists. The September 1896 *Atlantic* ran Turner's "The Problem of the West" as the lead article, and it had immediate impact (Turner, "Problem"). "Extracts and summaries dotted the press; the widely read magazine *Public Opinion* reprinted much of the essay, and others reproduced shorter extracts" (Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner* 192-93).

The article rarely referred to contemporary issues but definitively gave the election context. To Turner, Bryan and his followers represented not fanaticism but rough-edged Western frontier democracy—an 1890s version of Jacksonian democracy. Turner restated much of the 1893 thesis more rhetorically. The first essay mentioned the Census eight times, including in the opening sentence, while the new version omitted it. Turner's interpretation of the ongoing East-West economic tensions was that the West's traditional call for less restrictive credit, as then tied to silver-backed currency, sprang from the region's frontier conditions. He maintained that the federal government historically favored Eastern interests, fueling Western resentment:

> At each stage of its advance, the West has favored an expansion of the currency. . . . In some portions of the country there was, and is, an aggregation of property, and vested rights are in the foreground: in others, capital is lacking, more primitive conditions prevail, with different economic and social ideals, and the contentment of the average individual is placed in the foreground. That in the conflict between these two ideals an even hand has always been held by the government would be difficult to show. (Turner, "Problem" 210)

Turner offered a resolution: the West's economy would eventually mature, and the demand for inflation would fade. Turner noted that his own state had seen Populist politics: "The State of Wisconsin, now much like parts of the State of New York, was at an earlier period like the State of Nebraska of today; the Granger movement and the Greenback party had for a time the ascendancy" (Turner, "Problem" 218). Bryan's Nebraska would someday be more like Turner's Wisconsin.[16]

Turner's thesis at once assured the nation and exalted it. It defused anxiety over Populism by portraying it as a homegrown and democratic movement

rather than the European socialist import many feared. Populism was a transient stage that Turner argued still—and always—improved the East (or more precisely, the older regions) by promoting social fluidity and renewal in long-settled areas. The frontier's benefits rejuvenated the entire nation:

> Decade after decade, West after West, the rebirth of American society has gone on, has left its traces behind, and has reacted on the East. The history of our political institutions, our democracy, is not a history of imitation, of simple borrowing; it is a history of evolution and adaptation of organs in response to changed environment, a history of the origin of a new political species. In this sense, therefore, the West has been a constructive force of the highest significance in our life. (Turner, "Problem" 205-6)

Turner glorified the frontier as the Census never could. The frontier no longer constituted, as it had for Gannett, a national discomfiture, especially compared to Europe, that needed to be explained away. Now it represented a national asset for Gannett's foreign friend to envy. The frontier defined the nation, cleanly separating Americans from Europeans. As Roderick Nash (146) notes, for Turner "the frontier not only made the American different from the European but better."

Remaking the Frontier Myth: Turner and the American Mind

In the 1896 election two concepts of America competed. Republicans offered the modern myth of the self-made man. The idea affirmed the new urban middle class and connected to Social Darwinism (Hofstadter, *Social* 44-50). Democrats advanced the agrarian ideal of the yeoman farmer, a familiar notion for more than a century, but one that modernity now threatened. Hamilton's urban-rational prophecy for the nation might soon triumph over Jefferson's rural-romantic vision (Lind 45). Many, including urbanites, lamented the passing of the quintessentially American Jeffersonian ideal and the rise of the more European-seeming Hamiltonian one.

Turner found a way to reinterpret this narrative and dispel its regret: he argued that American democracy could endure the loss of its agricultural foundation. Contrary to much commentary, Turner rejected the environmental determinism of contemporaries like William Graham Sumner (Pickens). He argued that pioneer settlement fostered national character traits, such as individualism, which in turn promoted social equality.[17] The frontier's passing would not necessarily harm democracy. Core values, once fixed, would endure as habits of the mind—what Turner called "survivals"—long after the disappearance of the material forces fostering them (Turner, "Problem" 205).

Thus Turner's thesis embraced a new, enlarged myth of the American yeoman. By the mid-nineteenth century, a specifically Western version of the rural myth emerged to replace the one that originated in the Old World and first found New World (mainly Eastern) expression in the thought of Jefferson and Crevecoeur. The later myth had more universality—more flexible appeal—than the earlier one. According to Henry Nash Smith, "The Western yeoman had become a symbol which could be made to bear an almost unlimited meaning . . . and it implied a far-reaching social theory" (Smith 154). The first myth evoked a mostly Anglo-Saxon, almost feudal landed society of local subsistence: exclusionary, static, insular, Eden-haunted, peasant-oriented. The second myth spoke to a generically European, industrial nation: inclusionary, expansive, dynamic, worldly, market-driven. The second myth offered a reassuring echo of the first but was not confined by it.[18] Both myths promised a form of rural utopia, but the first myth primarily offered security, the second opportunity. Turner's signature contribution to the second myth gave it an analytic framework drawn from the social science of the day, especially the Census.

Turner infused an old subject with new, wider appeal. Turner linked the agrarian myth to scientific rationality through the Census' use of social evolution (Trachtenberg 14 and Freund 85). In the process he revived a seemingly outdated ethos by making it objective and outward-looking. Turner restated the nation's creation myth in optimistic and positivistic terms, virtues in most Victorian-era cultural settings. As a result he sparked the biggest mental shift in the history of American historiography. Turner oversimplified and overreached, inevitably provoking scholarly discussion and revision (G. Nash, *Creating*). But his broad-brush approach gave his idea wide appeal. Turner's sweeping narrative lent itself to different interpretations—by liberals and conservatives, Easterners and Westerners, capital and labor—that proliferated as twentieth-century America diversified (see Hofstadter, "Turner" 435). Turner's thinking, despite its rural tilt, fit the emerging moral order of urban-industrial society. Glenda Riley writes, "In his search for wider contexts, for organizing principles, for the universal rather than the particular, Turner studies masses of people, types rather than individuals, *the* people rather than people themselves" (Riley 24, emphasis in the original).

The great sociologist Emile Durkheim, in perhaps his prime contribution to the theory of modernity,

contended that as a society's division of labor becomes more complex, larger sociocultural variations result. Therefore the common consciousness "more and more comes to consist of very general and very indeterminate ways of thinking and feeling, which leave an open place for a growing multitude of individual differences" (Durkheim 172). Collective images become less concrete, more interpretive. Drawing on the preexisting concepts, they shift from strict to free-form construction of, for instance, religions or constitutions. So to fit ever-more-diverse cultures, modern master symbols such as the frontier thesis must be characterized by generality. The vagueness of Turner's frontier thesis, often considered an academic weakness, in fact helped increase its impact. The frontier lost its place on maps but tightened its grip on the American mind, offering itself more centrally as the outdoor church of American civil religion. Turner's most enduring legacy is the simple idea that the frontier has significance (Deverall 187 and Cronon 89). While Turner the frontier historian keeps drawing sharp academic attack, Turner the national mythmaker remains mostly unchallenged.

Even as his ideas reassured the country, Turner himself worried about the American future. As he wrote in 1903, "What ideals persist from this democratic experience of the West; and have they acquired sufficient momentum to sustain themselves under conditions so radically unlike those in the days of their origin?" (Turner, "Contributions" 260-61). Yet explicit efforts to maintain the frontier's ideals and social patterns continued for decades afterward in a variety of fields.[19] Writing in 1943, eleven years after Turner's death, James Bryant Conant, Harvard's president and a former Turner student, proposed radically restructuring higher education to have it allow the social mobility and opportunity that the frontier once offered. He argued that open, merit-based universities could provide the "equivalent of those magic lands of the old frontier" and that Americans should "use the powers of government to reorder the haves and have-nots every generation to give flux to our social order . . . comparable to that [found] in a pioneer community a century ago" (Conant 43-44. See also Lemann 42-52). Today Turner is explicitly and influentially invoked to justify an acceleration of NASA programs for manned American landings on Mars, a new colonizing frontier to invigorate the nation (Zubrin 295-306).

The historiographic consequences of Turner's impact have been complex. John Lauritz Larson writes: "At one hundred years, then, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' stands secure among American historical writings as the source of some of our most original, most fruitful, most controversial, and most enduring scholarly debates. Four generations of historians have found themselves practically incapable of writing without some reference to the frontier thesis" (Larson 241). No alternative to the frontier thesis has overturned it. Turner amplified a century-long, still-evolving interpretive process that has by now widened the frontier's meaning far beyond its late-nineteenth-century Euroamerican cultural base. By reinvigorating the frontier myth, he mediated whether the frontier was a process or a place. It clearly had once been both at the same time. But now the settlement process lived on in its effects on the American character, while the place became the West (Lang, Popper, and Popper, "Is There").

The frontier's meaning, as Durkheim would predict, keeps evolving and growing. The New Western Historians' attempts since the 1980s to reimage the frontier represents only the latest round in making it more inclusive by extending it, for instance, to pioneer women and non-Euroamericans. After attacking Turner for more than a decade, the New Western Historian critics have recently come to partial terms with Turner's impact, if not with his ideas. Limerick, for example, finds that Turner's frontier thesis unites the nation in odd ways: "Packed full of nonsense and goofiness, jammed with nationalistic self-congratulation and toxic ethnocentrism, the image of the frontier is nonetheless universally recognized, and laden with positive associations. Whether or not it suits my preference, the concept works as a cultural glue—a mental and emotional fastener that, in some curious and unexpected ways, works to hold us together" (Limerick, "Adventures" 94). She finds Turner admirable as an historian who made sure his work had public impact; she respects, for example, the resonance of the *Atlantic Monthly* article for the 1896 election (Limerick, "Turnerians").

At the same time, the New Western Historians sidestep why Turner succeeded. He and the public were never really at odds, and the public never had to catch up to him. Instead Turner's appeal came from a convincing adaptation of an already-common belief. He turned the belief into a myth that could easily hold the public's allegiance, for it now reassured and exalted them. Today, the American public knows that the frontier was much more complex than a shoot-'em-up Western; it agrees with the New Western Historians that the frontier developed in diversity and adversity. To match Turner's extraordinary impact, however, perhaps Turner's critics need to shift from

debunking to translating the multifaceted, ambiguous character of the frontier and of America into an optimistic narrative that helps negotiate the future. As Durkheim (and Malin) suggest, key thinkers—those Malin calls "the great"—channel inchoate folk thought and give it coherence. Turner's experience shows how the process begins. "Elbow Room," the electronic fable for Americans under forty, shows where it went—until the next great channeler appears.

Notes

[1]Compare Turner: "The trails widened into roads, and the roads into turnpikes, and these in turn were transformed into railroads" (Turner, "Significance" 14).

[2]Popular culture images that reflect Turner's influence are in fact legion. Take, for example, Disney's Frontierland, which is well described by Robert Francavaglia.

[3]Herman Clarence Nixon identifies several writers who anticipated Turner's focus on the frontier's significance, starting with Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1844.

[4]Walker applied the techniques to a whole range of variables in addition to population. See, for example, the reprinted Census maps of forest cover comparably divided by degrees of density in Williams (24-27).

[5]Walker was instrumental in getting nontaxpaying Indians counted in the Census.

[6]On Spanish settlement, see Bolton. Bolton portrays Spanish borderlands as flexible defensive zones. The Spanish, unlike the Americans, saw no need to fill up their territory. For a more recent interpretation, see Weber.

[7]About the map, which appeared just before Texas independence, see Young's (120) comments "To the people of the United States, Texas is peculiarly interesting, from its immediate contiguity, and from the circumstances of Anglo Americans forming the principal portion of its rapidly increasing population."

[8]Gannett, who was on the Harriman expedition to Alaska, saw the place as America's permanent frontier.

[9]The figure comes from dividing 95 percent of the nation's 1880 population (47.7 million) by its 1.4 million square miles of settled land east of the frontier line. The numbers appear in Walker and Gannett (22).

[10]In 1891, Walker was concerned with increased immigration. Richard Easterlin (395) quotes Walker: "[A]s the foreigners began to come in large numbers, the native population more and more withheld their own increase."

[11]This passage first appeared in the Census Bureau's (1891) publication "Distribution of Population According to Density: 1890," 4. Turner cites the passage in "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1).

[12]See the "Map Showing Five Degrees of Density: The Distribution of the Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census 1890" (Porter, Gannett, and Hunt, following 27). The language in the relevant portion of the statistical atlas that accompanied the 1890 census was more direct: "There is no longer any frontier line" (Gannett, "Density" 14).

[13]Gerald D. Nash ("Census" 98-100) argues that the Census's Superintendent, Robert Porter, "closed" the frontier, but similarities between the Census's "broken into" language and Gannett's comments suggest otherwise.

[14]For details on Turner's background, see Billington (*Genesis* 3-146 and *Frederick Jackson Turner* 3-108), Benson ("Historical" and *Turner* 1-91), and Bogue (3-56). As Bogue (26-32) points out, Turner spent the late 1880s, in periods between college and graduate school, as a journalist and a teacher of rhetoric and oratory, a path predisposing him toward reaching an audience. His training was in both the more humanities-based history at the University of Wisconsin and in the new, more social science-based history at Johns Hopkins University.

[15]For a classic analysis linking Turner's frontier hypothesis to Jefferson's image of the yeoman farmer and the larger American myth of the garden, see Smith (291-301).

[16]In his 1893 essay, Turner (32) notes that "Many a State that now declines any connection with the tenets of the Populists itself adhered to such ideas in an earlier stage of development of the State."

[17]For the opposing view, see William Graham Sumner, especially his concept of man-to-land ratios. Sumner argues that low-density high-resource societies are naturally democratic, but in the reverse case a Malthusian dynamic leads to despotism. "Democracy itself, the pet superstition of the age, is only a phase. . . . If you have an abundance of land and few men to share it, the men will all be equal (Sumner 185).

[18]David Emmons (451) argues the force of Turner's argument lay in its use of "recognizable American types" pursuing their historic mission.

[19]On Turner's public impact in the early twentieth century, see Wrobel (71-142). Turner kept the frontier discussion focused on the West rather than watch it shift to the plausible new psychic home in the urban labor zone. His broadening of the frontier concept, however, helped its later application to that environment (Slotkin, *Fatal Environment*, 1975, and *Gunfighter Nation*) and Emmons (451).

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