Swayamprakash on Abbott, 'Imagined Frontiers: Contemporary America and Beyond'

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Frontier Imagination

In *Imagined Frontiers*, Carl Abbott asserts that a frontier is “an edge—a line on a map and the territories and communities that surround that line” (p. 3). Through this definition, Abbott not only acknowledges the fraught place of the frontier—in both the American imagination and history—but also understands the frontier as a process. In fact, it is precisely because the frontier holds almost a mythic place in American history and imagination that he probes its many overlapping and nested meanings. In trying to investigate the frontier as not just a place, Abbott constantly straddles the interstitial and fluid nature of the frontier. Furthermore, he thinks of frontiers as zones of settlement as well as “places of possibility for the invention of new institutions or the reinventions of self” (p. 4).

In his consideration of the overlapping fields of western history, urban planning, and science fiction, Abbott focuses on writers, scholars, and artists “to set up a three-way conversation between popular ideas about cities, regions, and other places on the edge; the ways that historians and social scientists have tried to understand these places; and the ways in which artists reimagine them.” He outlines the three different scales along which he examines frontiers: “the metropolitan frontier of suburban development, the class continental frontier of American settlement, and yet unrealized frontiers beyond the bounds of a single planet” (p. 5). These scales also undergird the tripartite structure of the book, which juxtaposes urban theory and historical interpretation with maps, films, and fiction. In so doing, Abbott keeps a sharp focus on the importance and persistence of the frontier in imagination in America.

Abbott’s central aim is to put into a productive dialogue various understandings and interpretations of these “edgy places” in North America in ways that do not see these categories as being discrete (p. 5). One of the most important and innovative contributions of the book is the juxtaposition of different kinds of media and sources. Attention to frontiers as understood and imbibed in culture allows Abbott to engage with the processes and myths that frontiers represent. It also allows him to use a contemporary vantage point to analyze and expose longer historical processes that are enmeshed in frontier mythologizing—settler colonialism, the construction of the West as *terra nullis*, and heroic individualism that drives populating and civilizing the empty frontier. Thus, the book begins, in part 1, with a consideration of two novels set in the Sunbelt Southwest where real estate development brings to the fore conflicts between Anglo settlers and indigenous and Hispanic communities. Abbott successfully shows that while real estate development does bring to the surface tensions, these
tensions themselves have a much longer and deeper history that can often be lost in narrow historical perspectives. The rest of the section carries forward the productive tension and dialogue between frontiers as places as well as processes chronicling the response of performance and visual art projects to Portland’s Urban Growth Boundary while others on The Sopranos, The Rockford Files, and the film Falling Down (1993) explore reinvention on the Pacific and Atlantic coasts. In the second section, “Continental Refuge,” Abbott chronicles the emptiness of frontiers in the Pacific Northwest, Florida, and Colorado. Unlike cities that are so often decimated in postapocalyptic literature, these are places where the future is still relatively “malleable and unconstrained” (p. 93). Thus the frontier in this section is a place where “work” happens. Envisioned as a place where inhabiting and living are tenuous and active processes, these “refuges” confront the emptiness of the frontier as articulated by Frederick Jackson Turner. The last section chronicles the transition of the frontier into science fiction, moving away from the surly bonds of earth exploring the inherent complexities and moral conundrums of colonizing other planets. Through these three parts, Abbott is able to show how frontiers are mythologized and propagated even as they are being critically engaged with and demystified.

*Imagined Frontiers* is thus an important read for borderlands scholars. It brings into sharp focus the fruitful intellectual space that frontiers—even with their fraught usage—can offer. Although many of the essays have been published previously, the introductory essays at the beginning of each section are helpful in binding together the chapters. One wonders though if the book would have been further enriched by a closer investigation of how frontiers and political borders interact. For instance, in talking about Cascadia, one wonders if a critical comparison to the Great Lakes megaregion might have furthered the discussion on how regions and identities are understood and lived through. These are, however, minor quibbles that do not take away from the originality, vision, and importance of the book itself.


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