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Women in the Contact Zone

In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner announced "the significance of the frontier in American history," and just over a century later, both the phenomenon of the "frontier" and its cultural significance are still being redefined and reconsidered. Brigitte Georgi-Findlay, associate professor of American literature at the University of Bremen, Germany, contributes her voice to the debate in *The Frontiers of Women's Writing: Women's Narratives and the Rhetoric of Westward Expansion.*

Turner's declaration that a specifically American national character could be attributed to the frontier experience has long dominated and troubled American literary, historical, and cultural studies. As late as 1950, Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* took up Turner's notion of the "empty space" beyond the frontier in a manner that, as Smith himself later acknowledged, constituted a "refusal to acknowledge the guilt intrinsic to the national errand into the wilderness" and a "tendency to assume that this area was in effect devoid of human inhabitants" (p. 2). Moreover, the narratives of westward migration have standardly been read as quintessentially masculine experiences, as can be seen in Leslie Fiedler's *The Return of the Vanishing American*, which defines the West precisely by its lack of feminine influence, giving the frontier a power destroyed by the arrival of women.

These premises about the frontier–and even the frontier's very existence–have been criticized and revised in much recent scholarship, from many different perspectives. Bruce Greenfield, in *Narrating Discovery: The Romantic Explorer in American Literature*, examines the ways in which the invention of a natural, empty America was a key development of the mythology of America, and writers including Richard Slotkin and Michael Rogin have reread the "frontier," not as formative of American character, but rather as instead constructed by the economic, cultural, and political project already extant in the East.

Feminist scholars, including Nina Baym in her landmark article "Melodramas of Beset Manhood" and Annette Kolodny in *The Lay of the Land* and *The Land Before Her*, have further reread the role of women in the experience of western expansion, interrogating the construction of the western land as a feminine entity to be "penetrated" and "subdued," as well as the mythologies of the male hero which have effectively kept women writers from inclusion in the literature of "America." But, as Georgi-Findlay argues, "in their focus on gender issues, feminist critics have at times tended to overlook the racial politics that prompted the pastoral myth, in which the white self was defined against racial others–a quest in which white women were enlisted as much as, sometimes even more than, white men" (p. 8).

Georgi-Findlay's project in *The Frontiers of Women's Writing* is in many ways a synthesis of these two revisionary projects, both re-attributing importance to women's narratives of westward expansion and re-reading those narratives for their constructions of the colonialist presence in the west. She examines in these narratives, which span genres including fiction, travel writing, semi-public diaries, and personal letters, across "a range of cultural discourses ordering relations of race, class, and gender" (pp. x-xi) to show how "women's accounts are implicated in expansionist processes at the same time that they formulate positions of innocence and detachment" (p. xi). By mobilizing Mary Louise Pratt's notions of the "contact zone," the "anti-conquest," and "imperial meaning-making," Georgi-Findlay explores the ways in which the narratives of westward expansion reveal the colonialist project in the West precisely by their

attempts at erasing the other cultures present in these contested spaces.

After an introduction which lays out the critical concepts she hopes to revise and the methodologies she will employ, Georgi-Findlay's text divides into three roughly chronological sections. In the first, "Surveyors of the Terrain, 1830-1860," Georgi-Findlay examines several early works which stretch the boundaries of travel writing. First, she encounters the narratives of women traveling and settling on the prairies east of the Mississippi, including Caroline Kirkland's *A New Home*, Eliza Farnham's *Life in Prairie Land*, and Eliza Steele's *A Summer Journey in the West*, among others. These texts repeatedly map the social terrain which their writers encounter, defining relationships both between the sexes and between the races, while at the same time using the techniques of the "anti-conquest" narrative to reinvent the prairie as untouched "nature." Georgi-Findlay next turns to the diarists of the overland trails who recorded their moves west to Oregon and California, arguing that these diaries, "whether written during the journey or many years later, still reflect earlier conceptions of the western lands as an inhabited Indian country, but they also begin to empty western landscapes by projecting aesthetic designs upon them or by appropriating them as realms for spiritual regeneration" (p. 77).

The second part of the text, "Army Women, Tourists, and Mythmakers, 1860-1890," reveals a shifting emphasis in these women's narratives from a political to an economic view of the west. Georgi-Findlay examines the writings of women attached to the army, many of whom were officers' wives, exploring how these women "locate their texts within the discursive frameworks provided by Indian policy discussions and by public discourses that manipulated the distinctions between war and peace, Indian extermination and civilization, and liberal humanism and social control in the context of westward expansion" (p. 112) and the ways in which that location contributed to the project of western myth-making. She then turns her focus to the opportunities for professional writing which the West afforded many women, including travel narratives, journalism, and fiction, by reading writers such as Sara Jane Lippincott, Helen Hunt Jackson, Frances Fuller Victor, Jessie Benton Fremont, and Susan Wallace.

The final section of Georgi-Findlay's project, "Missionaries, Reformers, and New Women, 1890-1930," focuses on the role of white women in the Christianization and Americanization of Native Americans carried out in the name of "Indian reform," including missionaries and reservation teachers. By exploring the writings of women such as Mary Clementine Collins, Beatrice Stoker, Elaine Goodale Eastman, and Mary Ellicott Arnold and Mabel Reed, Georgi-Findlay searches out the ways in which "[o]n many colonial frontiers, white women became the excuse for–and the custodians of–racial distinctions" (p. 240).

Individually, many of Georgi-Findlay's arguments and conclusions will sound familiar to most readers. It is the synthesis of these disparate strains of thought which makes her project valuable, as she attempts to re-inscribe women's narratives as central to the experience of western expansion, while simultaneously exposing how these narratives are implicated in complex issues of colonial power and authority. By mobilizing multiple discourses–including the "frontier myth" as an intentional cultural reworking, the post-colonial reconsideration of the frontier as a "contact zone," and the feminist reconsideration of women's roles in the West–*The Frontiers of Women's Writing* usefully and gracefully confronts the difficult–and at times unsavory–place of women's narratives in the American project of imperial meaning-making.

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