

Fall 2008

Reviews of *Hunger for the Wild: America's Obsession with the Untamed West* By Michael L. Johnson and *Frontiers: A Short History of the American West* By Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher

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Jacoby, Karl, "Reviews of *Hunger for the Wild: America's Obsession with the Untamed West* By Michael L. Johnson and *Frontiers: A Short History of the American West* By Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher" (2008). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1318.  
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## REVIEW ESSAY

*Hunger for the Wild: America's Obsession with the Untamed West.* By Michael L. Johnson. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007. xvii + 533 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$34.95.

*Frontiers: A Short History of the American West.* By Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007. vii + 248 pp. Maps, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$28.00 cloth, \$19.00 paper.

### THE SPINNING OF THE WEST

Whither the grand narrative in historical scholarship? For years, critics have cautioned us that narratives are, in Hayden White's words, little more than a form of "emplotment" whose order and coherence oversimplify the inherent messiness of the past. Yet the inconvenient fact remains that human beings are unparalleled storytelling creatures. Whether or not events occur in a narrative format, with a clear beginning, middle, and end, we tend to perceive them in this way—and to relate them in this structure to one another.

Still, not all narratives are created equal. In keeping with the postmodern turn, historians have been increasingly drawn of late to quirky, eccentric tales, rendered more often than not as microhistories or in other, novel genres. Such stories find their value less in their typicality than in their atypicality and their ensuing ability to disrupt conventional interpretations of the past.

Far rarer—and more suspect—is the attempt to craft a master narrative that presents an authoritative overview of a subject or time period. Nevertheless, there remain those scholars bold enough to propose the broad, sweeping master narrative. Western history seems particularly prone to this impulse. After all, what was Frederick Jackson Turner if not the author

of perhaps the most successful master narrative in all of American history? Even the "New Western History," despite its sharp critique of Turner, remained wedded to the master narrative ideal, merely situating conquest or aridity or markets as the great new story of the West. In the decades since the bold statements of Patty Limerick's *Legacy of Conquest* (1987) and Richard White's *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own* (1991), however, few have taken up the challenge of trying to craft a new Western history master narrative. The recent arrival of two ambitious works doing precisely that by senior scholars of the West therefore marks an important moment, one that allows us to revisit once again the question of narrative and Western history.

On their face, *Frontiers: A Short History of the American West* and *Hunger for the Wild: America's Obsession with the Untamed West* propose familiar organizing themes for their stories. Faragher and Hine, as their title suggests, structure their narrative around the trope of frontiers. Doubtless well aware of the critique this term has endured over the past twenty years, they attempt no rigorous definition of it. Rather than follow the lead of scholars such as Steve Aron and Jeremy Adelman and elaborate a rehabilitated notion of frontier, Faragher and

Hines adopt the opposite tactic: stripping the term down to its bare essence, rendering frontier into little more than a shorthand way of thinking about “where and how cultures meet” (5). This meeting, Faragher and Hines emphasize, was at root about the encounter between Native and non-Native peoples, and so their work endeavors to “highlight . . . the Native American side of the frontier” (vii).

Johnson’s title—*Hunger for the Wild*—is equally telling. His project organizes itself around the concept of “wildness,” which he defines as “cultural as well as natural” and thus discrete from wilderness (xv). In substituting wildness for wilderness, Johnson seemingly seeks to transcend a controversy of his own: the debate over the meaning of wilderness occasioned by Bill Cronon’s provocative 1995 essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness.” If it remains something of a running argument as to whether wilderness is an actual place or a state of mind, wildness becomes capacious enough in Johnson’s usage to embrace both poles—to encompass, as he puts it, the “real and imagined” aspects of the West alike (xv).

The narratives in *Frontiers* and *Hunger for the Wild* are thus set in motion by a parallel set of foundational encounters: that between Euro-Americans and Indigenous societies and that between Euro-Americans and the natural world. Despite such similar opening strategies, however, the two studies quickly exhibit notable distinctions. In part, this disjuncture is disciplinary in nature. Johnson is a professor of English, albeit with a strong historical bent. His research, omnivorous and eclectic, draws heavily from literature and other art forms. When he incorporates the work of other scholars—and he does so frequently, giving generous space to quotations from what will be to readers of *Great Plains Quarterly* a Who’s Who of Western historians—he leans upon them not so much for specific facts but for interpretive insights. As a result, reading *Hunger for the Wild* feels akin to listening in on a lively upper-level seminar, in which the participants, well-read and a bit loquacious, mull over various ways of making sense of western “wildness.”

As is often the case in such exchanges, what matters most in these discussions is less the specifics of what “really happened” in the West and more the meanings Americans have attached to events. Thus, to take one classic example, Billy the Kid makes his initial appearance in *Hunger for the Wild* not as a flesh-and-blood person but as a literary character in sheriff Pat Garrett’s 1882 text, *The Authentic Life of Billy the Kid, the Noted Desperado of the Southwest*. Johnson’s discussion of “the Kid” then spirals out to embrace the “synecdochic inclusiveness and transformative power” (163) of firearms in American culture, the terse dialog of Cormac McCarthy novels, and the heroic warrior archetype that can be traced all the way back in Western culture to Achilles in *The Iliad* and which, according to Johnson, has wielded considerable influence on American portraits of the outlaw.

If Johnson’s work is a dizzying fizz of cultural analysis, intoxicating and effervescent, Faragher and Hine adopt the close-to-the-ground perspective of the social and community histories each has produced in previous works. (Faragher was Hine’s student, and the two collaborated on a longer study, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* [2000], of which *Frontiers* is a condensation.) Taking as their subject the European colonization of North America, Faragher and Hine proceed in a manner at once comprehensive yet synoptic. Readers are treated to a continental perspective of French, Russian, Spanish, and English colonial projects throughout North America that, as it proceeds from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth, gradually narrows to the United States’ experience in the trans-Mississippi West. Although not inattentive to the cultural dimensions of this process, Faragher and Hines tell a story that is above all about the struggle for control of resources. The nuts-and-bolts details of government policies such as the Northwest Ordinance and Indian Removal that tend to get lost amid Johnson’s lofty musings assume central stage in *Frontiers*. So, too, do the efforts of those who opposed the emerging capitalist order in the West, be

they Populists or the Wobblies or Geronimo's Chiricahua Apaches. Although Billy the Kid makes his inevitable appearance in a discussion of dime novels, *Frontiers*, unlike *Hunger for the Wild*, also describes the tension over open rangeland that sparked the violence for which the Kid and others became so celebrated.

What are we to make of the existence of two such seemingly different offerings as the new Western master narrative? Part of the variation between the two works, of course, can be traced to the long-standing divide between cultural and material analyses of the past. Johnson is the classic idea man, content to see Western history as expressing archetypes deeply rooted in European culture and the human psyche (the modern-day cowboy, for example, represents in Johnson's treatment "the ancient myth of the sacred hunter" [158]). In contrast, although Faragher and Hine have a chapter at the end of their book on "The Myth of the Frontier" exploring the showmen who have shaped Americans' memories of the Western past, their account is very much situated in tangible social and economic developments. Thus, while the chapters in *Hunger for the Wild* bear headings like "Wild(e) Style: Ralphlaurenizing the Range" and "Beyond John Wayne: Bewildering Westerns and Wild Wild Texts," *Frontiers* marches its readers through a very different sequence: "The Fur Trade," "Mining Frontiers," and the "Open Range."

Viewed in this light, *Frontiers* and *Hunger for the Wild* can be considered as either talking past or complementing one another, each developing insights the other tends to overlook. Conversely, selecting one narrative over the other—choosing, as it were, the "better" story of the West—seems to reduce itself at first glance down to a question of aesthetics or intellectual predilection. Forced to pick on these terms alone, my own preference would be for *Frontiers* (full disclosure: I was a graduate student of Faragher's at Yale). Johnson's book buzzes with intriguing turns of phrase and trenchant insights. It introduces a number of fascinating new artistic portrayals of the West

and reintroduces many classic statements. Still, to my mind *Hunger for the Wild* is too digressive, too long (over 400 pages), and too rooted in what are ultimately unprovable assertions. One has either to accept Johnson's observations about "[t]he ontological paradox of the etherealized Wild West of Remington and Russell" (211) or not, for, as with most cultural analysis, there is no empirical way to measure such claims.

Faragher and Hine's book, in contrast, clocks in at a taut 225 fact-rich pages. While it breaks little new ground conceptually, as a short, single-volume summation of the current state of historical scholarship on the American West, it is probably unmatched by any other book available today. For those looking for a readable introduction to the field (or, for that matter, for a textbook for a Western history course), *Frontiers* is a model, touching upon all the key topics in the Western past with concision and deep learning. (This latter quality makes the few strained passages that do pop up—likening the "alcohol trade to the Indians" in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, for example, to the "modern cocaine business" [31]—all the more jarring.)

Beyond these differences there is perhaps another reason to prefer *Frontiers*. It is by now a familiar charge that whatever utility the notion of the frontier may possess for understanding earlier eras, its so-called "close" at the turn of the last century leaves the term with little explanatory power for events taking place in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Faragher's and Hine's book is not immune to this critique; indeed, most of its pages focus on what might be called Western history's long nineteenth century of Indian wars, mineral strikes, cattle drives, railroads, and the like. Still, because it conjures up a meeting place among different groups, the use of the frontier as the organizing theme in Faragher's and Hine's narrative has the virtue of placing cross-cultural interaction at the heart of their analysis. To be sure, frontier can be an imprecise way of getting at such interactions. Native Americans, for example, have rarely considered themselves a single

group, so to speak of them as constituting “one side” of the frontier inappropriately collapses their varied cultures and histories into a single tale. Yet at least the concept moves an often ignored historical actor, Native Americans, near the center of the action.

Johnson’s metaphor of wildness, with its emphasis on the Euro-American encounter with nature, would seem to be a potentially more problematic construct around which to build a new master narrative for the West. The concept does, in fairness, allow Johnson to triangulate his discussion into cultural terrain that Faragher and Hine leave unmapped in their study. It also propels his analysis into later time periods: *Hunger for the Wild* is notably richer in its discussion of the recent West than is *Frontiers*. But wildness is a subjective enough notion that it is sometimes difficult to discern much of an organizing principle behind Johnson’s text. Moreover, the metaphor of wildness risks subsuming groups such as Native Americans into the “nature” side of the encounter. In the end, wildness does not seem to detour around the perils posed by the concept of wilderness but merely to restate

them in new form. After all, if wildness is less a meeting place than a way of looking at the world, it becomes difficult not to privilege the perspectives of those doing the looking.

The larger question these two books place before us is whether a region like the West can ever be contained within a single master narrative. It may turn out that Frederick Jackson Turner’s greatest drawback as a scholar was neither his unduly progressive view of history nor his invocation of the term frontier, but rather the belief he instilled in generations of Americans that the North American continent was a vast theater in which but a single, all-encompassing history had been enacted. In this respect, having two contesting master narratives to contend with in *Hunger for the Wild* and *Frontiers* can only be a welcome development. For gauging the distance between these two different stories of the West may help us uncover the multiplicity of tales that remain to be told about our past.

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