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**Review of *The Frontier in American Culture: An Exhibition at the Newberry Library, August 26, 1994-January 7, 1995* Essays by Richard White and Patricia Nelson Limerick**

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# REVIEW ESSAY

"The Frontier in American Culture." The American Library Association, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, Illinois 60611, and the Newberry Library, 60 West Walton Place, Chicago, Illinois 60610-3394. Richard White, curator.

*The Frontier in American Culture: An Exhibition at the Newberry Library, August 26, 1994-January 7, 1995.* Essays by Richard White and Patricia Nelson Limerick. Edited by James R. Grossman. Chicago: Newberry Library/Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. Illustrations, notes, checklist. xiii + 116 pp. \$30.00 cloth. \$15.00 paper.

## THE EMPEROR ON THE AMERICAN FRONTIER

Richard White, the creator of the touring panel exhibition "The Frontier in American Culture," made his reputation promoting a product labeled "New Western History." He wrote a textbook on the topic, and one passage in that book reveals the conception that frames this exhibition: "People simply murdered Indians," he writes (*It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own* [University of Oklahoma Press, 1991], p. 338). If you are one of the people, perhaps that kind of statement seems acceptable, but from the point of view of one of the Indians it looks like full frontal bigotry. Further, it calls into question the moniker New Western History: there's nothing new about an American historian's conception that distinguishes Indians from people.

Does the imaging of native people in "The Frontier in American Culture" reflect a new interpretation? Of some eighty-one images of American native persons in the exhibition, three of the adults are women, one is of indeterminate gender, the gender of two of the children cannot be determined, the third child is a girl, and the other seventy-five images are of adult males. These images of native

persons may be considered in two ways: as part of a scholarly performance stating a thesis and striving to support it, and as a commodity—marketable images of the past.

Viewing the exhibition as scholarship, one asks where the images of natives fit. The thesis of the exhibition is that two white men in the late nineteenth century wielded great influence as image makers: Frederick Jackson Turner and William F. Cody ("Buffalo Bill"). Mr. White displays his interpretation of the icons those other two white men created and tacks on a few images by native men relating to one of Cody's icons. Are we to believe that the exhibition thus incorporates a significant native point of view?

What are the native men doing who are depicted in this set of icons? They are either engaging in violence against the invaders of their homeland or standing by passively at the margin of the frame while the "people" stream into the country like ants at a picnic.

What are the women doing? One is fleeing her home with her children as a pack of male "people," agents of U.S.-sponsored violence (a cavalry unit), storm into her town. So one-third of the native woman icons of the

American frontier, having gathered her children, is fleeing out of the picture. Another woman in the same scene is surveying the attack on her town from a position on her knees. In a more peaceful scene, we glimpse the third native woman with her family from a great and safe and detached distance. Native women are hardly a presence in the American identity.

What about the three images created by native people? One is a running battle—violence; two gaze upon Custer. Is it possible that our native ancestors had anything else on their minds back then other than being violent and gazing on a violent blond male? White represents the native point of view as a contribution to his own imaging of Cody's imaging of Custer.

The exhibition concludes with contemporary images that represent frontier themes but include no contemporary images of native people except for somebody fighting Davy Crockett on a waste basket. There's space today for cowgirl Barbie, but no space for Leonard Peltier, the Chippewa political prisoner who helped defend the Oglala lands in the 1970s.

The scholarly interpretation of this exhibition is offered in a sixty-five page essay by Richard White full of nifty juxtapositions about how Turner and Cody "divided the narrative space of the West between them" (p. 45), "capitalized on our modern talent for the mimetic . . ." (11), and so on. Text from the essay is abstracted on the exhibition's panels, but who's gonna read all that stuff? It's not the textual extracts but the images on the panels that carry the crucial message. Is the average American viewer going to study the "narrative space of the West" and the "modern talent for the mimetic"? What are children going to take away from their viewings of this exhibition?

What do those images say about American native people (assuming that we are people)? They declare that we are given to violence and acceptable only in marginalized, non-

threatening statuses; that nearly all of us are men; that our men are violent or acceptable only when complicit with the invasion of our lands; that our women and children don't matter; and that now it's correct to ignore us altogether. That's the exhibition's contribution to the present imaging of Native America.

Let's think about the exhibition as commodification. When its original was mounted at the Newberry Library in 1994, White's collaborator James Grossman gave a seminar on its creation, explaining it as a set of icons of the American frontier. Fellows of the Library then probed the method Grossman and White had used in selecting those icons. Somebody wondered why they had represented native women so inconsequentially and unsympathetically. Grossman replied that nothing else was available. What about the prominent eighteenth-century image of the native woman as the symbol of America in its entirety? That image was a powerful symbol in Europe in its time. (Most white Americans today are descended from Europeans who were still in Europe in the eighteenth century, so surely the identity of most white Americans has been exposed to that icon.) Grossman explained that he and White had considered that image and decided it was a can of worms. In fact, it was also a red herring. That's a fish. Fish and worms make for a pretty slimy icon. No wonder they left it out.

Were the available images by native artists really limited to studies of war and Custer? Plains tribes have kept records called winter counts that include images of nineteenth-century themes unrelated to violence. Some of those are available. Works of art by Apache prisoners at Fort Marion from 1876 to 1878 treat nonviolent themes. But White is not representing the frontier; he is representing the product that Frederick Jackson Turner and, especially, William F. Cody packaged and sold as frontier. In fact, White has repackaged the same commodity as a scholarly exhibition and is hawking it to us.

These are the same images of violence and subordination of the tribal people (if we are people) that the American market has lusted after for generations. So don't look for images of the land as the sacred living context of tribal life. Don't look for native families living peacefully on the lap of the Earth. You won't find them playing ball, creating quillwork, deliberating over political issues, or nurturing a subsistence from the soil.

No mass American market is demanding those images, so White, as Turner and, especially, Cody before him, looks the other way. So America's children will take in these images that White has repackaged and sold, and the children will learn that native people are male and violent and duly subordinated and finally nonexistent.

The new clothes bedecking "The Frontier in American Culture" hide a Eurocentric, male hegemonic, Indian-hating interpretation of the American so-called frontier. What's scary is not that a little panel exhibition is parading naked bigotry, but that historians are lining up along its route to applaud it as high fashion.

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#### NOTE

Traveling exhibition. 5 September-17 October 1997: Missoula, Montana, Public Library; University of Nebraska-Lincoln. 31 October-12 December 1997: Sacramento, California, Public Library; Danville, Illinois, Public Library. 27 December-6 February 1997: University of Washington, Seattle; Decorah, Iowa, Public Library. 20 February-3 April 1997: California State University, Fullerton; Camden County Library, Voorhees, New Jersey. 17 April-29 May 1997: Western State College, Gunnison, Colorado; Mansfield, Ohio/Richland County Public Library. 12 June-24 July 1997: Denver Public Library; Duluth, Minnesota, Public Library. 7 August-18 September 1997: Madison, South Dakota, Public Library; Houston Public Library. 2 October-13 November 1997: Washoe County Library, Reno, Nevada; Williamsburg, Virginia, Regional Library. 28 November 1997-8 January 1998: Scottsdale, Arizona, Public Library; Tampa, Florida, Hillsborough County Public Library. 22 January-5 March 1998: Boise, Idaho, Public Library; Public Library of Cincinnati & Hamilton County. 19 March-30 April 1998: San Diego Public Library; David Lipscomb University, Nashville, Tennessee. 14 May-25 June 1998: Teton County Library, Jackson, Wyoming; Kansas City, Missouri, Public Library. 9 July-20 August 1998: Laramie County Library System, Cheyenne, Wyoming; Lexington, Kentucky, Public Library. 3 September-15 October 1998: Parmlly Billings, Montana, Library; University Libraries, Indiana University-Indianapolis. 29 October-10 December 1998: Brigham City, Utah, Library; Campbell County Public Library, Gillette, Wyoming.