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Foreword for Courtney White's THE FRONTIER

There are many kinds of wildernesses, Aldo Leopold wrote in A Sand County Almanac, and each kind enforces a different set of responses from the people who live there. These responses evolve as cultures, patterns of relationship, adaptation, and submission between people and the land.

The American West is one such culture, or more accurately a half dozen related cultures, so recent that we have been able to watch it or them grow. The Wests are as different as Spokane and Santa Fe, Missoula and Moab, but they are made a kind of whole by their prevailing aridity and the adaptations it has made necessary; and those adaptations, begun in the earliest years of the frontier, have created differences in occupation, costume, attitude, language, life-habits, that mark the West off from other regions.

All of the Wests are young, still nascent. All have been more or less obscured by the myths of self-reliance, individualism, and anti-social independence that as cowboy or badman or lone-riding gunslinger hatched like cuckoo chicks in a robin's nest and crowded out the legitimate nestlings.

Cowboys, badmen, and gunslingers were a part of the historical West, but only for about a generation. In the mythical West of horse opera they go on, timeless, changeless, endlessly repetitive, preserved in amber or under glass, and they have taken our attention away from the real people of the real past and the real present.

The real cultures of the West, in contrast with the mythical one, developed slowly and against difficulties. Aridity made permanent settlement difficult. From the beginning the West was a society of transients, looters, raiders of the beaver, grass, timber, minerals, with more hit-and-run migrants than stickers. Those conditions have not changed materially. The frontier that Frederick Jackson Turner thought had ended in 1890 did not end, as if a gate had been closed, when the census revealed no border region with less than ten people to the square mile. As Patricia Limerick and others have demonstrated, the frontier went on, and still goes on. It was not a period in our history, but a process. The West was not a timeless tableau but a continuum, a developing adjustment of people to the large, empty, arid, unforgiving spaces of the country beyond the hundredth meridian. Its past and present are not two things, but one. As Courtney White suggests, they can be studied with the same tools.

The tool he chooses is his camera. In image after image he catches, past or present, the confrontation of human energy, need, and habit with a hard and obdurate country whose rules are strange and take a long time in the learning. Some of his images are images of failure, some of apparent (don't count on it) success, some of a stand-off or compromise. In some of them the past survives almost without change; in some the present has overwhelmed all memory of the past. All of these images, of country or people, past or present, are worth our ^{attention,} for they reveal forming Wests that have been ^{the} little studied or understood, but that rebuke romantic myth-making with their plainness and honesty.

What is the West becoming? What does this continuing frontier lead to? It would take a bold person to predict. The West's history of boom and bust suggests a future of the same, for aridity is not going to go away. The past emphasis on extractive industries is likely to be continued into the future simply because the available water permits only an oasis civi-

lization, towns located on dependable water, with great empty dry spaces between them. Western space, and the human attitudes that it breeds, especially mobility and that curious western combination of independence and cooperation, will go on. The myths, worse luck, will also go on, so long as there is space in which cowboy heroes can ride off into the sunset. But what the various Wests will do for a sustainable economy, once the grass, timber, and minerals are gone to join the beaver and the buffalo, is a harder question.

I choose to take a hopeful view, the view that our history of reckless waste, our destruction of grasslands and forests, our gutting of the mountain gulches and our leavings of dead tailings and dangerous mineshafts, our ruthless elimination of the native cultures and the wildlife--all our mistakes born of ignorance and greed--will eventually be corrected. That the boosters' promotion of western scenery will go the way of other booms, and that the population, or at least the permanent population, will settle down to something that this dry country can carry. That within the sparse permanent settlements of the prairie and mountain and desert West there will grow communities with the kind of tough roots that will hold--I can't forget that the oldest living things on the continent are the creosote rings of one of our driest deserts, When you are forced to live against the roughest of conditions you are likely to be able to outlive most things born in kinder circumstances.

I am sure that the continuing frontier, the continuing effort of people to make the arid lands do more than the arid lands can do, will further erode that fragile ecosystem. We will have more and worse desertification. But we may also learn something, slowly. I suspect that in the old Dust Bowl states of Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, where the Ogallala Aquifer is pumped down almost to bedrock, the next drought will have

calamitous effects, and that a region where already population is shrinking, farms are going back to grass, towns are withering away and disappearing, may sooner or later go back to the buffalo commons that Frank and Deborah Popper have been prophesying and advocating.

Whatever sustainable economy emerges from a century and a half of raid, attempted settlement, mistaken development, and incorrigible optimism, we will have our West, our several Wests. They will continue to be the most spectacular and most fragile part of the United States. They will continue to provide a meager living and a wonderful life to those who will submit to western conditions. The frontier from which they all began will go on, too, changing and molding and sandpapering the responses of the people.

What we have in Courtney White's book is a recording of one passing phase of that frontier. And what a pleasure it is to see the real Wests captured in their flow! What a reassurance it is to see the Wests recorded in their living reality, instead of getting another view of somebody being cut off at the pass in the Alabama Hills or the Kanab Desert, shooting wildly with both hands from guns that never need re-loading.