

# Introduction

## “Metaphor that Becomes Epical”

You can't write a story about LA that doesn't turn around in the middle or get lost. . . . Art is supposed to uphold standards of organization and structure, but you can't have those things in Southern California—people have tried.

—Eve Babitz, “Slow Days”

On a hot June night in 2018 I stood in darkness at the end of Hermosa Beach pier, two beers into conversation with my friend and mentor Professor Stephen Cooper. I was living in Culver City on a Fulbright fellowship, which Steve had persuaded the Department of English at Cal State Long Beach to support. Most days I caught the bus from the McDonald's at Venice and Overland and rode it up to UCLA, where I was conducting archival research that would inform this book. The bulk of that archival work lay among the papers of the Italian American author and screenwriter John Fante, whose biography Steve wrote and whose ornery presence stalks these pages perhaps more stubbornly than any other author. As I listened to Steve relate a story of one of Fante's many misadventures, I let my gaze fall on the glittering black water below us and was struck by a sudden surge of awareness that this, terrifyingly vast and miraculously near, was the Pacific Ocean.

Somehow, I hadn't until that moment noticed it for what it was—the same Pacific Ocean that laps ominously beneath the feet of the desperate dancers in Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935); the same Pacific Ocean where Arturo Bandini nearly drowns in Fante's

*Ask the Dust* (1939). Turning around, I looked back toward land, to the distant flickering of city lights. I realized that I stood at last in a place from which a journey to Los Angeles, to the city that symbolizes, in its continent's end location and its paradigmatic urban mass, the terminus of the United States' historical westward expansion, had become an *eastward* one. I realized too, with awe, that to stand in this place was finally to make real the curious remark of Raymond Chandler's that had been my point of departure on the journey that led ultimately to this book.

Chandler once wrote in a letter to Hamish Hamilton that plays were inferior to novels because only the latter could induce the "feeling of the country beyond the hill."<sup>1</sup> When I first encountered that claim, more than a decade ago now, in my final year as an undergraduate, it seemed a strikingly peculiar definition of fiction's aims to arise in the mind of someone who wrote of and at the western limit of the American landmass, and whose works are so suffused with a sense of that place. When a national mythohistory equates forward movement—*American* movement—with westward movement, I wondered what it meant to ascribe to fiction both an ability and an imperative to disclose the "country beyond the hill." I wondered, too, what it meant to make such an ascription in and of a place where, unless one turns around, turns east, turns *back*, there are no more hills for a country to be beyond. Chandler's spatial metaphor for fiction's power and purpose prompted me to reflect on how fictional representations of Los Angeles respond to the city's unique sociogeographic location. If fiction seeks the country beyond the hill, I began to wonder, how are LA fictions' attempts to do so inflected by their subject's lack of the same? This book constitutes some answers to that question.

It seeks those answers by reading fiction through the defining mythohistorical concept of the United States' westward continental march: the frontier. I argue here that from their age's popular theories, histories, imaginings, and fading memories of the frontier, fictions depicting Los Angeles between the onset of the Great Depression and the early 1950s derive a conceptual framework with which to figure and understand the multiethnic spaces of urban modernity. I do so by analyzing certain spaces that recur throughout those fictions—dancehalls, offices, industrial facilities, and homes. Parsing the ways in which characters of varying social positions occupy and move through these recurrent spaces, I show how sociocultural recuperations and revisions of the frontier suffuse the literature of this place and period. What I term "frontier dynamics" can thereby be understood as one of the major ideological discourses underpinning

the mid-century literary imagination of Los Angeles, at once reflecting, compounding, and troubling its status as a city with a unique place in American myths of triumphal western conquest. To identify these frontier dynamics in this body of literature is to enable a new interpretation of its contributions to discourses on the American post-frontier condition. Against prevailing critical narratives of recent decades, I propose that mid-century LA fiction figures violent criminality, brutal ethnic divisions, and rampant social inequalities not as the tragic consequences of America's inability to function without a frontier, but as the (no less tragic) consequences of the frontier's persistence.

This book's arguments thus actualize and locate themselves at intersections between two contexts—the place the frontier occupies in the American imagination, and the place Los Angeles occupies in the American imagination. The remainder of this introduction accordingly seeks to articulate those contexts, suggesting how a reappraisal of the relationship between them constitutes the basis of a compelling new way to navigate the iconic cityscapes of LA's mid-century fiction.

## Locating the Frontier

### TURNER'S SHADOW

To rehearse Frederick Jackson Turner's contributions to American historical discourse is to recite a creed. From the 1890s to the 1920s, Turner promulgated a theory of American history that conceptualized the nation's western frontier, articulated the processes by which it had advanced across the continent, and claimed that those processes "explain[ed] American development."<sup>2</sup> The frontier, Turner held, propagated and demanded a people defined by individualism, willingness to undertake physical exertion in hazardous conditions, belief in democratic ideals flecked with a suspicion of intrusive institutional authority, and above all an insatiable urge for perpetual movement.

Turner was not the first to tell the American story in a manner that ascribed singular significance to the frontier. Turner's frontierism was anticipated, to name just a few examples, in J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's belief that the American natural environment had given birth to a "new man," in the folk legends that arose around Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, and in James Fenimore Cooper's Leather-

stocking tales.<sup>3</sup> Turner himself acknowledged debts to Francis Grund, who had theorized in the 1830s that Americans were driven by an inherent “expansive power” to conquer wilderness in restless westward motion.<sup>4</sup> *The Winning of the West* (1889–1896), Theodore Roosevelt’s four-volume frontier history, also partially predated Turner’s.<sup>5</sup> Even as the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition hosted the American Historical Association meeting at which Turner first advanced his frontier thesis, just beyond its boundaries spectators flocked to see “Buffalo Bill” Cody’s Wild West. By this point, Cody’s enterprise had already been a successful traveling attraction for ten years—its popularity and longevity suggestive of a culture that needed little convincing by an academic historian that its story was that of the frontier.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, throughout this book I bring specifically Turnerian theorizations of the frontier to bear upon mid-twentieth-century fictions because it was Turner’s influence that determined how the frontier would be understood in the sociocultural discourses to which I see those texts responding. “Within half a decade” of its initial 1893 expression, William Cronon writes, “Turner’s thesis had gained wide national attention and was being promoted by a number of leading intellectuals.”<sup>7</sup> The 1910 award of the chairmanship of the AHA recognized Turner’s status as his era’s professional narrator of nationhood, as did the Pulitzer Prize awarded to his career-summative 1921 collection *The Frontier in American History*.<sup>8</sup> By 1951, Walter Prescott Webb could look back upon Turner’s career and lionize him as no less than “the thinker who could view the whole scene and the whole dramatic experience [of America] and tell what was its meaning.”<sup>9</sup> Webb was, along with Frederick Paxson, one of the most prominent of the post-Turner historians whose embrace of frontierism lent it disciplinary dominance in academia during the period on which this book focuses.<sup>10</sup> Turnerism’s rapid acceptance as academic orthodoxy in turn helped to entrench the significance of the frontier in popular conceptions of history and national identity. Turnerian thought, John Pettegrew writes, “penetrated modern US . . . consciousness”: its reach extended from the nation’s intellectual elites to its middle classes, from the rhetoric of politicians to the themes of cinema—and, as this book contends, to the fiction of mid-century Los Angeles.<sup>11</sup> In Kerwin Lee Klein’s words, “by 1930 [Turner’s] narrative dominated American history as no other tale ever has.”<sup>12</sup>

What made Turner’s account so compelling—and distinguished it from earlier frontier discourses like those of Grund or Crèvecoeur—was

that in declaring the frontier to have defined American socioeconomic, political, and psychological development he also declared it dead. Turner famously cites an 1891 Census Office bulletin, which reported that “isolated bodies of settlement” had “broken into” all of the nation’s hitherto unsettled territory, on which basis “there could hardly be said to be a frontier line” in America.<sup>13</sup> That casual declaration of the frontier’s disappearance, Turner writes, “closed the first period in American history.”<sup>14</sup> Situating a case for the frontier’s overwhelming significance within an announcement of its closure, writes Cronon, “framed [Turner’s] argument prophetically,” rendering it a statement about the future as well as the past.<sup>15</sup> The precise meaning of Turner’s “prophecy,” however, remained stubbornly ambiguous within his own work.

At times, Turner’s predictions for the post-frontier era were pessimistic. The frontier had ingrained “energies of expansion” in Americans, and the loss of a “field for [the] exercise” of those energies had created conditions of ominous social unrest.<sup>16</sup> “In the remoter West,” wrote Turner, “the restless, rushing wave of settlement has broken with a shock against the arid plains. The free lands are gone, the continent is crossed, and all this push and energy is turning into channels of agitation. Failures in one area can no longer be made good by taking up land on a new frontier; the conditions of a settled society are being reached with suddenness and with confusion.”<sup>17</sup> Even as he asserted the finality of the frontier’s demise and made grim forecasts on that basis, however, Turner also held that “traces” of “frontier characteristics” remained detectable in places that had long been settled.<sup>18</sup> Even the West itself, the now-exhausted space of the frontier’s expression, was fundamentally “a form of society, rather than area.”<sup>19</sup> As Pettegrew notes, Turner’s writings in fact locate “many examples of the pioneer spirit in modern urban culture.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, in some formulations, Turner’s “suggestion that Americans inherited the acquired characteristic[s]” of frontier existence was a claim that “the expansive character of American life” could be maintained in the frontier’s absence.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere in his work, though, it was a warning that cultural and economic entropy were inevitable in a frontierless world where essential national characteristics had been rendered inexpressible.

By locating this fundamental inconclusiveness within an otherwise authoritative declaration of the frontier’s end, Turner subjected the meaning of that declaration to immediate and intractable public contest. In Philip Fisher’s phrase, Turner drew “lines in the sand” that instigated and set the terms of a multivocal, decades-long, culture-spanning discourse

about the fate of the post-frontier United States.<sup>22</sup> Some participants in that discourse would affirm Turner's belief in the frontier as the source of American greatness, while others would claim that the frontier condition had in fact inhibited America's social and cultural maturity. Some believed, for better or worse, that the frontier was lost forever, others in the possibility of its transmutation from geographic to metaphorical spaces. Some wished for "new frontiers"; others hoped to avoid them.

The poles of this debate can be neatly encapsulated in a comparison between statements made by two Turnerian historians—Webb and E. Douglas Branch—at opposite ends of the period on which this book focuses. In 1930, Branch wrote that "'Westward' is not accurate as a direction" but rather "finds its greater meaning as a transitional phase in American life," echoing Turner's conception of the West less as any one swathe of land than as a social phenomenon.<sup>23</sup> If the frontier is understood as a "transitional phase," it is repeatable, perhaps inevitably so. If the frontier is a mode of thought, a way of understanding the world, it holds the potential to outlive the geographic circumstances with which it was originally associated. Webb, by contrast, averred in 1951 that the frontier's role in American development resided in its very singularity as a set of social and physical circumstances; no "new frontier" could reproduce the effects of something that definitionally had "no plural."<sup>24</sup> As a result, American society had become irretrievably "homesick" for and thus paralyzed by its pioneer past.<sup>25</sup>

Mid-century Los Angeles fictions exhibit, I will suggest, these countervailing Branchian and Webbian impulses simultaneously. These fictions make frontiers through characters who live in perpetual states of transition, manifesting the possibilities of what it might mean to "live westwardly" in modern urban America—but in doing so they reflect the frontier past's stubborn discursive persistence as a way of structuring American life. Such fictions thereby become legible as vital contributions to a national post-Turner conversation about the endurance or otherwise of frontier characteristics. In order to recognize them as such, however, we must first understand something of the places where that conversation occurred and the shapes that it took.

One school of post-Turnerian thought found an early manifesto in Frank Norris's 1902 essay "The Frontier Gone at Last." Norris concurred with Turner's belief in the frontier's cultural significance but saw cause for optimism in its closure. He wrote that American frontier expansion had emblemized a period of global history in which nations had defined

themselves by territorial supremacy. Perhaps, Norris mused, if the passing of the frontier heralded an age bereft of space over which to compete, nationalist ideologies of spatial and commercial conquest could be supplanted with a “new patriotism” of transnational brotherhood that transcended nation state boundaries and rivalries.<sup>26</sup> Exploring the contested multiethnic spaces of fictional Los Angeles in this book, however, I find few equivalent possibilities. Indeed, my readings of Los Angeles’s mid-century fiction, especially in chapters 1 and 3, identify frontier ideology’s mythologizing of territorially aggressive ethnonationalism as its most persistent and insidious legacy.

Norris’s proposal represented a challenge to the views of many Americans, who had the previous year signaled their desire to preserve frontier values by sending a performative frontiersman to the White House. In Theodore Roosevelt, the United States elected an embodiment of widespread contemporary “antimodernist” calls for the preservation of the nation’s remaining wilderness and a return to the values that had supposedly been inculcated there. The antimodernists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries echoed Turner’s fears about the condition of “settled society” in a belief that, absent the frontier’s nation-defining call to heroic, masculinist individualism, America was becoming “overcivilized,” denuded of virility and vitality.<sup>27</sup> Such beliefs underscore my readings of visions of white masculinity in chapters 2 and 4 of this book.

Waldo Frank was more confident than the Rooseveltian antimodernists that frontier values would continue to define modern America despite the loss of their geographic proving grounds, but shared Norris’s diagnosis of their influence as malign. In *Our America* (1919), Frank attributed a litany of ills in the American character to the nation’s frontier youth. Locating the most sinister implication of the Turnerian frontiersman’s compulsion to place himself “under influences destructive to many of the gains of civilization,” Frank averred that “the pioneer must do violence to himself.”<sup>28</sup> For Frank, battle with the wilderness had been an act of psychological self-harm on the part of early American society. The precarity of the frontier engendered a rigid, survival-oriented pragmatism, resulting in an atrophying of the imaginative faculties, a privileging of the material over the intellectual, and a defensive hostility to the alien. As “the legs of the pioneer [became] the brains of the philosopher,” America’s cultural growth was stunted.<sup>29</sup> Frank was not original in proposing that that rough-and-ready frontier life had precluded the refinement of national character: Turner himself had noted (disapprovingly) how common it was to identify

“dishonesty, ignorance, and boorishness as fundamental Western traits.”<sup>30</sup> Frank’s fear, though, was that precisely because the defining quality of the frontier-derived American mind was a reflexive conservatism, it was capable of enduring far beyond the now-extinct conditions in which it developed.<sup>31</sup> A Frankian notion that the danger of the post-frontier era was not in the dissipation of frontier values but in their insidious endurance, and in the damaging limitations placed upon a society unable to escape the totalizing rigidity of a frontierist worldview, is one this book frequently identifies in its fictional subjects.

The onset of the Great Depression appeared to corroborate Turner’s fears for the fate of a people divested of spaces in which to expend their “energies of expansion,” and thus invested fresh urgency in the popular contestation of the frontier’s legacy and the nation’s post-frontier condition. There is no clearer indication of the frontier question’s prominence in this period than the fact that Franklin Roosevelt and Herbert Hoover explicitly debated the possibility of “new frontiers” in society, science, and industry while campaigning for the presidency in 1932.<sup>32</sup> In so doing, they built directly upon intellectual groundwork laid two years earlier by *Individualism: Old and New*, John Dewey’s “faithful application of the frontier thesis” to the social challenges of the day.<sup>33</sup> Dewey accorded with Frank in critiquing the frontiersman’s incapability of thinking “beyond . . . the immediate tasks in which he was engaged,” but retained Turnerian praise for the frontier’s inculcation of an individualist “character that . . . was strong and hardy, often picturesque . . . sometimes heroic”—and which had on the whole served the nation well.<sup>34</sup>

Dewey was preoccupied with determining how the best frontier traits could be adapted for a new era, and the worst attenuated. At a time of socioeconomic crisis, Dewey remarked, “it is no longer a physical wilderness that has to be wrestled with. Our problems grow out of social conditions: they concern human relations rather than . . . physical nature.”<sup>35</sup> This “unsubdued social frontier,” unlike its geographic predecessor, could not be conquered by lone individuals. It could only be mastered, suggested Dewey, by directing the pioneering instinct, “through controlled use of all the resources of the science and technology,” into “scientific frontiers.”<sup>36</sup> The “new individualism” had to reconcile itself somehow to collective enterprises. Dewey, Roosevelt, and Hoover, moreover, all addressed what Webb termed the tension between “the closing frontier and the expanding production of the machine,” asking whether modern capitalism was dangerously incompatible with America’s now-frustrated frontier spirit, or



could in fact become its new vehicle.<sup>37</sup> Such tensions between the rugged individual and the collective imperatives of post-frontier capitalist modernity, wherein the latter ironically becomes a social frontier to be assailed, are present in many of the fictional texts this book explores.

Dewey's *Individualism: Old and New* appeared a year after the first English edition of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber's theories are broader in world-historical scope than Turner's, but have much in common with them—and with those of Frank and Dewey, both of whom interpreted frontier character as a particularly materialistic strain of Puritanism. A laboring culture of “struggle against one's environment—the kind of practical, here and now struggle that paid off in material rewards,” as William H. Whyte would later describe Weber's ethic, also defines Turner's frontier.<sup>38</sup> Webb almost synthesizes the two in describing frontier existence as “The Religion of Work.”<sup>39</sup> Both the frontier as conceived by Turner and the Protestant ethic as described by Weber, moreover, share the paradoxical position of having fueled capitalistic growth only to be threatened by their own creation, as forces of industrial modernity foreclose upon a “dream of individual success.”<sup>40</sup> Weber never mentions Turner or the frontier by name. Nevertheless, the American publication of *The Protestant Ethic* is another signifier of a culture grappling in the 1930s to resolve its veneration of idealized individualistic labor with the demise of the conditions by which such labor was engendered.<sup>41</sup> Turnerian questions were prominent in the public mind, even when not expressed in Turnerian terms.

Popular culture likewise contested the fate of post-frontier America in the decades of Turnerism's greatest influence. Peter Stanfield notes that the minor studio B-Westerns of the 1930s constructed themselves on narrative grounds “wholly inapplicable” to the “frontier myth”—often set in “a geographical West in which the frontier ha[d] long since gone” and dealing less with “historical imperatives of the winning of the West” than with “intrigue between labor and capital.”<sup>42</sup> (Again, Depression-era anxieties about industrial modernity are palpable.) Robert Sklar meanwhile holds that the Western's 1930s decline as an A-picture genre represented the cultural completion of Turner's frontier foreclosure.<sup>43</sup> Thus the frontier could be powerfully present even in its absences: both the Western's fall from favor with major studios and its reconfiguration in B-films as a way of mediating a “tension between old and new worlds” constituted a social reckoning with Turner's declaration.<sup>44</sup> In music, Jimmie Rodgers responded similarly to the negotiation between old and new demanded

by the frontier's end. His "railroad bum" travels not west but east, from "Frisco" to "Dixie": if his journey across the "wide open spaces" of the southwestern US enacts a yearning for the past, for a time when one's ability to move through the West was not circumscribed by an officious brakeman, it also feels the limits of Dewey's old individualism—the bleak absence of a "helping hand."<sup>45</sup> Later came Hank Williams. The name of his backing band—the Drifting Cowboys—declared debts to frontier iconography, but maintained ambiguity as to whether "drifting" acknowledged a world that had lost direction or asserted that there yet existed space in which to roam.

Crucially, as Webb himself would note, the frontier's enduring impact on American life in the first half of the twentieth century derived not merely from its historicity as an empirical phenomenon but from its packaging into a potent cultural narrative. Historians themselves were partly responsible, having "made [Americans] conscious of the frontier": if the frontier persisted in the American mind, it was impossible to tell if it did so because that mind possessed a genuine "frontier character" or simply because the frontier had become "a slogan with good sales quality."<sup>46</sup> Webb recognized that Turner's thesis about the frontier's significance had become self-fulfilling. Even if the frontier had not defined the American past to the extent that Turner had claimed, by the 1930s the sheer weight of intellectual, political, economic, literary, and popular cultural discourse about the frontier that appeared in Turner's wake ensured that the *idea* that it had defined the American past in turn defined the American present. In that vein Carey McWilliams, beginning to establish himself as one of Southern California's leading public intellectuals, used a weary 1931 essay to bemoan an America with frontiers on the brain. McWilliams wrote that "the final extension of the frontier to the Pacific" had not quelled but boosted the industry of frontier "myth-making" (as McWilliams categorized all discourse that amplified Turner's belief in the frontier's nation-defining force).<sup>47</sup> The "dolorous mood" of Turner's declaration of frontier closure, McWilliams wrote, had engendered "an inordinate modern-day enthusiasm for the frontier and frontiersman" throughout American culture.<sup>48</sup>

McWilliams looked askance at his era's popular romantic fascination with Old West iconography. Mocking the notion that the frontier survived "in the movie daring of Tom Mix or Douglas Fairbanks" or was psychologically reborn "whenever [Americans] see a pair of chaps," McWilliams was skeptical of what he saw as quasi-superstitious contemporary beliefs

in the frontier's conceptual persistence, "hover[ing] above and around us like a disembodied spirit."<sup>49</sup> American culture after Turner, argued McWilliams, found it impossible not to see the frontier everywhere it looked. He was correct, but his observation provides precisely the rationale for seeking the frontier in fictional texts written in the period of Turnerism's greatest influence, a period when diverse cultural spheres, from the high-brow to the popular, gave enduring conceptual life to times and spaces that Turner had declared gone for good. What I locate in Los Angeles's mid-century fiction is precisely that which McWilliams derides, a sense of a frontier that has "seeped inward and survives today as a subjective force," suffusing texts made in and by a world over which Turner's shadow loomed inescapably.<sup>50</sup>

McWilliams, moreover, neglected to note that the frontier's enshrinement at the heart of American culture in the decades following its demise was the work not only of "enthusiasts" but also of the various flavors of frontier refusenik—men like himself, like Frank, like Norris. In the very act of critiquing the Turnerian conception of the frontier's historical significance, the desirability or viability of replacing it with "new frontiers," and/or the cultural "enthusiasm" for the frontier maintained in other quarters, voices like McWilliams's own contributed to the frontier's overwhelming presence in the thought of early to mid-twentieth-century America. It is just such a role that I often find this book's fictional subjects occupying. Their visions of a culture that continues to structure itself upon frontier logic, constantly privileging social values that vouchsafe the possibility of "new frontiers" in modern urban space, are frequently critical. In offering such criticism, however, the texts themselves become locations of the frontier's reconstitution. I read such fictions simultaneously as reflections of, interrogations of, and contributions to the frontier thesis as the defining American cultural narrative of the first half of the twentieth century, texts that intervene in and add to an insistent national conversation about what Fisher terms "the single most important historical idea ever proposed by an American intellectual."<sup>51</sup>

Turnerism's legacies reach beyond the period of this book's investigation, but I depart at a point when frontierism's thoroughgoing acceptance as empirical historical reality became subject to increasing qualification. Webb's 1951 *The Great Frontier*, in constituting arguably the last significant work of emphatically Turnerian history while simultaneously commenting self-reflexively on historians' own role in rendering the frontier central to American consciousness, represented a turning point. The previous year,

Henry Nash Smith had already begun more comprehensively emphasizing the notion that the frontier's greatest historical significance was as a *myth*—a task that would later be taken up magisterially by Richard Slotkin.<sup>52</sup> In the 1980s, the New Western Historians “moved decisively to confront the frontier myth and . . . suggest the possibility of imagining a West that operates autonomously” from it.<sup>53</sup> As Cronon writes, their revisionist critique that Turnerian history is “geographically inaccurate, culturally biased, and potentially racist, leaving too little room for non-white ethnic minorities” (and women) is justified.<sup>54</sup> I myself make no claims for the facticity or validity of Turner's model, and I hope that the character of my interpretation of it throughout this book makes clear that I am alive to its problematic lacunae. I deploy Turnerian ideas about the frontier and the American West from a critically historicist perspective, in order to demonstrate and engage with their essential contextual bearing upon the fictions that this book explores.

Similarly, Turnerian and post-Turnerian discourse lightly invokes monolithic notions of American identity, spirit, or character that would make any responsible twenty-first-century scholar wary. When I employ such terms, as I do particularly frequently within this introduction, I do so exclusively within the context of adumbrating historical and historiographical beliefs that such things existed and could be defined, rather than to profess such beliefs myself. It is on the same critical basis that I engage with the central Turnerian dichotomy of “savagery” versus “civilization.” This dichotomy and its phraseology are, of course, loaded with an especially problematic set of accrued cultural meanings—even by the standards of nineteenth-century frontier history and whether encountered in their original Turnerian setting or in the twentieth-century literary contexts to which I apply them. Throughout this book, therefore, I always frame instances of “savagery” and “civilization” in quotation marks, to emphasize continually that these terms are invoked with reference to Turnerian thought and with the aim of interrogating rather than reproducing their harmful legacies and implications.

#### WHAT DOES A FRONTIER LOOK LIKE?

Immediately after establishing his central argument with the Census Office's straightforwardly statistical method of determining a frontier, Turner contradicts himself. “The term,” he writes, “is an elastic one, and . . . does not need sharp definition.”<sup>55</sup> This book, however, requires

a more precise sense of what a frontier actually *is*, if it is then to perform its task of identifying frontier conditions in fiction—especially when its subjects describe what are ostensibly non-frontier settings. Despite Turner’s airy dismissal of definitions, it is possible to build one by parsing his works.

Turner’s frontier lies at the “hither edge of free land,” which hardy individuals—“frontiersmen” or “pioneers”—drive into “continuous recession” through the westward advance of American settlement.<sup>56</sup> It is a sociospatial liminality, both its location and the conditions it manifests existing between opposed states of wilderness and settlement, or “savagery and civilization.”<sup>57</sup> In describing it as both “a continually advancing frontier *line*, and a new development for that *area*,” Turner establishes the spatial complexity of his frontier.<sup>58</sup> It is at once a dividing line between settled and unsettled *and* a discrete-but-permeable area of intermediate space that separates the two. In this sense the frontier’s spatial liminality is also temporal: because its existence as the space between settled and unsettled is transitory, part of a process of moving itself forward through progressive geographic conquest, the frontier exists only as a momentary present. This spatiotemporal axis is an “article of American faith,” Klein writes: “history runs from East to West.”<sup>59</sup>

Turner’s metaphor for the frontier of “the outer edge of the wave” apprehends this. As the successive waves of an incoming tide wash higher up a shore, what was once the furthest limit of a previous wave’s advance is absorbed into the main body of water. Thus, as the frontier moves westward, former “outer edges” are successively absorbed into settled American “civilization”: Michael Steiner describes this as the frontier’s “self-destroying process.”<sup>60</sup> The frontier’s progression is therefore simultaneously cyclical and linear. The tide as an integral whole represents the linear progression of westerly expansion over time, but that overarching process is in fact made up of countless smaller cycles (waves) by which successive unsettled spaces gradually become settled. Such a space is only a frontier while its social qualities manifest both “savagery” (yet-to-be-fully-conquered) and “civilization” (yet-to-fully-conquer) before being occluded by the eventual triumph of the latter. As that triumph is enacted in a given area, the frontier is deferred into the future and into the West, “beginning over again” in “perennial rebirth.”<sup>61</sup> Thus Turner’s wave illustrates how the frontier’s liminality is multiply (if unidirectionally) mobile: its spatial, temporal, and social axes operate in concert. The macro-process of “crossing a continent . . . winning a wilderness” and

the micro-process of “developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive . . . conditions of the frontier . . . the complexity of city life” are mutually propelling and inextricable.

These are the spatial and temporal characteristics by which I define frontierlike conditions in the fictions this book addresses. A frontier must exist as a liminality between areas or states figured as settled or “civilized” and those where social regulation breaks down entirely. Moreover, it must be not an inert buffer but rather a mobile space of constant negotiation between the two. This transitive quality may thus render the frontiers I seek temporally liminal—fleeting states, moments that cannot hold. By the same token, however, because the temporal dimension of Turner’s frontiers is cyclical, the frontiers I find may be fleeting but repeating, momentary liminalities rendered a constant (even inescapable) state through recursion.<sup>62</sup>

Turner’s “free land” is always in some way hostile and does not yield itself up readily—it must be fought for. Turner figures westward movement as “conquest”; land is “won” or “wrested” from its wilderness state, from itself.<sup>63</sup> The frontier demands that its ingressors express themselves in “aggressive courage, in domination, in directness of action, in destructiveness.”<sup>64</sup> The frontier condition is therefore defined by conflict: only after it has been won through physical and mental battle by individuals representing “civilization” can the frontier progress further west. Historiographers have debated Turner’s conception of the form this conflict takes. As Cronon states, there is a widespread belief that in framing the frontier as a battle between man and “free land” Turner “ignored [the] Indians” whom Americans encountered there.<sup>65</sup> On this basis Slotkin asserts that Turner “marginalizes the role of violence in the development of the Frontier,” in contrast to Theodore Roosevelt, for whom “the history of the Indian wars (which are, for him, fundamentally wars of racial superiority) is the history of the West.”<sup>66</sup> In Slotkin’s formulation, Turner rejects “the mystique of privileged violence,” while Roosevelt glorifies it: between the two exists a “hunter/farmer dichotomy,” with Roosevelt winning the West by “deeds of the sword,” Turner through agrarian triumph.<sup>67</sup> Klein writes similarly that Turner “deflected attention from interethnic conflict by imagining the defining American moment as an encounter with pristine nature rather than a collision of cultural worlds.”<sup>68</sup> In doing so, he “conflat[ed] Indian and Hispano peoples with wilderness and free lands,” and therein “legitimated Euro-American imperialism.”<sup>69</sup> For Pettegrew,

likewise, Turner both “downplayed violent frontier traits” by framing them as positive and “concealed frontier warfare by portraying Native America as a built-in part of the environment,” thereby “conflat[ing] Native Americans with the wilderness.”<sup>70</sup>

This criticism of Turner, however, itself conceals the extent to which Turner *does* center human violence. When Turner identifies Andrew Jackson as a frontier archetype he does so substantially on the basis of Jackson’s role as a brutal scourge of Native Americans.<sup>71</sup> He names “hostile Indians and the stubborn wilderness” as coequally obstructive and resistant to those who pushed the frontier westward.<sup>72</sup> Above all, he states explicitly that each phase in the frontier’s advance “was won by a series of Indian wars.”<sup>73</sup> Slotkin is undeniably correct that Turner devotes more attention to the “yeoman farmer” than to the “wilderness hunter or Indian fighter,” but Turner is incontrovertibly clear that the efforts of the former depended on those of the latter.<sup>74</sup> As Cronon notes, the Turnerian claim that land unsettled by Americans was “free” was never a claim that the land was “free of *inhabitants*”—only that it had yet to be circumscribed by any property right recognized in American law.<sup>75</sup> Turner does not, in fact, “obscure the historical role of violence” (to borrow Slotkin’s characterization) when he elides conflict with Native Americans and conflict with wilderness.<sup>76</sup> Violent encounters with Native Americans do not contradict Turner’s sense of the frontier experience as an encounter with “free land” because, as Klein and Pettegrew themselves suggest, the supposed “wildness” of indigenous peoples is, for Turner, merely a symptomatic constituent element of the frontier’s defining environmental hostility. Indeed, racial violence is embedded fundamentally in Turner’s model precisely because he does not regard Native Americans as ontologically distinct from the wilderness conditions whose conquest frontier expansion effects.

This characteristic of Turnerism is essential to my model of how frontier characteristics might manifest themselves in the spaces of modern, urban fiction, because it obviates any suggestion that frontier conflict must be between human beings and the natural environment, or that a frontiersmanlike figure must be the only human presence in a frontier-like space (which would of course preclude any identification of frontier conditions in depictions of urban modernity). On either the Rooseveltian or Turnerian frontier, the type of conflict with an inhospitable “environment” that an ingressor finds is often human conflict, conducted usually on racial lines. On this basis I justify attributing frontier characteristics to

spaces where characters compete with each other through various forms of aggression to assert their sociospatial supremacy, especially where those conflicts are defined by race, ethnicity, or similar power dynamics that frame one party as the representative of hegemonic power (“civilized”) and the other as marginal (“savage”).

The spaces I examine need not, however, manifest explicit violence between humans to suggest frontierist qualities of conflict and contestation—as Slotkin suggests, Turner *does* often figure the frontier as a conquest of surroundings rather than of people. Thus, while every space I identify as frontierlike must manifest some quality of spatial contest, that contest is as likely to be with the space’s own material or social qualities as with a directly hostile human presence. As Ray Allen Billington and Martin Ridge note, the “backbreaking labor” of farmers was, for Turner, among the ultimate frontier conquests.<sup>77</sup> My framing of spaces as fictional frontiers frequently deploys the notion present in Turner’s emphasis on the agrarian frontier that labor itself may in its physical and psychological challenges constitute the perpetually mobile conflict between environment and individual by which the frontier is defined. As Webb writes, “all the high words the frontier man used to describe himself and to express his egoistic ideal, meant *work* of one sort or another. Courage, initiative, aggressiveness, and industry, can be best expressed in action, movement; that is, in work.”<sup>78</sup> Within this book’s context of fictions produced under and depicting organized industrial capitalism, moreover, such work might manifest human conflict (at either interpersonal or structural, class-based, race-based, or gender-based levels) instead of or *as well as* an arduous physical challenge.

In any case, for Turner and his adherents, the labor of advancing through and subduing the wilderness is always an expression of individualism. The frontier both requires and makes individualists. In doing so, however, it creates the defining paradox of Turnerism—the recurrence of which in LA’s mid-twentieth-century fiction I identify as one of the clearest ways in which that fiction reveals its frontierist commitments. In quelling the frontier, Turner’s frontiersmen act *for* “civilization” but are never *of* it, setting themselves apart physically and socially and therein demonstrating a liminal character concomitant with that of the frontiers they seek out—hence the antimodernist concern with “overcivilization.” An individualist desire to seek out and test oneself against the wilderness is, for Turner, a rejection of “the complex political, economic, and social



customs required in the stratified societies” of the settled East.<sup>79</sup> Pushing the frontier westward is a “civilizing” act, but one carried out in the process of escaping from the creeping restrictions of “civilization” itself.

This is never, though, for Turner, an anarchistic rejection of belief in exceptionalist American democracy. Quite the opposite—it is the embodiment of what he regarded as that democracy’s “truest” (Jeffersonian or Jacksonian) forms:

Western democracy included individual liberty, as well as equality. The frontiersman was impatient of restraints. He knew how to preserve order, even in the absence of legal authority. . . . Society became atomic. There was a reproduction of the primitive idea of the personality of the law, a crime was more an offense against the victim than a violation of the law of the land. Substantial justice, secured in the most direct way, was the ideal of the backwoodsman. He had little patience with finely drawn distinctions or scruples of method. If the thing was one proper to be done, then the most immediate, rough and ready, effective way was the best way.<sup>80</sup>

The frontiersman’s conception of democracy as the “belief that those who win the vacant lands are entitled to shape their own government in their own way,” a faith in “the freedom of the individual to seek his own” without “restriction upon his individual right to deal with the wilderness,” further determines the frontier’s identity as a contested space.<sup>81</sup> When two such individuals have competing designs on “vacant lands,” conflict is inevitable—either between the two parties as a “rough and ready” way to determine whose will takes precedence in the absence of adjudicatory structures, or with whatever such institutional structure does exist.

On such a basis I seek to identify frontier dynamics in post-frontier urban fictions via figures who express a frontier character. This means not merely that they must be individualists, but that their individualism must manifest in an iconoclastic desire to seek out some form of arduous conflict and/or labor, and also become a source of conflict in itself. Such figures should embody in some way the Turnerian frontiersman’s paradoxical attitude to “civilization” and, according to context, perhaps to the American state specifically. I seek characters who in some way reflect the frontier’s intrinsic generative contradiction of an aggressive presence

within wilderness that results from a rejection of or by normative societal structures (“civilization”) but ultimately becomes a self-erasing act of service to the same.

#### WHAT DOES A FRONTIERSMAN LOOK LIKE?

Frontierism is “deeply ethnocentric” and male-centric, a “(white) national identity centered on men and in the face of an indigenous ethnic other.”<sup>82</sup> The centrality of whiteness to Turner’s vision is clear in his acknowledgment that the story of the frontier is a story of race war against Native Americans, not to mention his choice of frontier archetypes: Turner is explicit that Jackson’s temperamental embodiment of “the tenacious, vehement, personal West” derived in part from his “Scotch-Irish” heritage.<sup>83</sup> As Valerie Babb writes, the figure of the frontiersman has become one of American culture’s “standard models of white identity”; he “represents white conquest of the American frontier.”<sup>84</sup> In Babb’s words, the foundational role of English Puritan settlement in hegemonic narratives of American nationhood renders the very idea of “conquer[ing] a sometimes unforgiving landscape” inextricable from whiteness in American culture.<sup>85</sup> For Richard Dyer, the frontier was not only “the leading edge of the white world” but also, because Native Americans were regarded by their conquerors as “borderless people,” both the imposition of a white ideology of spatial division and that ideology’s practical enactment.<sup>86</sup>

Turner’s frontier archetypes (Jackson, Lincoln, Jefferson, Boone, Crockett) also frame the frontier as a male space, as does sheer weight of textual evidence: crudely but instructively, Turner’s collected frontier writings contain nine occurrences of “woman” or “women,” against 272 of “man” or “men.”<sup>87</sup> While historical social norms dictated that the very first occupants of a frontier in its wildest initial state (the hunters and fighters Roosevelt venerates) *were* typically men, Billington and Ridge write that “the popular picture of a predominantly male social order . . . bears little resemblance to actuality. On virtually all frontiers that had reached the agricultural stage men outnumbered women only in slight degree.”<sup>88</sup> Despite Turner’s emphasis on agrarianism, however, that misleading “popular picture” is his. Turner does not suggest that women or children were not or could not be present in the wilderness, but in his history male agency is as absolute over women and their destinies as it is over the landscape itself. Indeed, in the gendered imagery of the Turnerian paradigm women are aligned less with the act of frontier con-

quest than with the conquered landscape itself—“virgin” territory to be “tamed, plowed, or fenced in” by men, solely a resource for the nation’s masculinist self-actualization.<sup>89</sup>

As Klein writes, in the era of Turnerism’s cultural dominance even critical conceptions of the frontier’s legacies “imagined the story’s hero as white, middle class, and male.”<sup>90</sup> Turner and his ilk “left Euro-American women, Native Americans, Chicanos and Chicanas, African Americans—all the ‘others’—outside of the heroic horizon.”<sup>91</sup> This does not mean, however, that in seeking frontier conditions in fiction I examine only white male figures. While white men and their various embodiments of, departures from, and anxieties about frontier archetypes do constitute significant portions of my analysis, I am frequently concerned with how these fictional spaces impose the frontier’s ideologies of white masculinity upon non-white characters. The fictional worlds I examine construct themselves as frontiers and thus demand that their inhabitants operate therein as frontiersmen. Yet where those characters are not white, they are prevented by the frontier’s logics of whiteness from occupying the identity of its mythic protagonist—rendering claims to the fictional frontier claims to whiteness and vice versa.

Women occupy similarly complex and multifaceted roles throughout the reconstitutions of frontier paradigms that this book identifies in fiction. At times, characters who are male and non-white identify white women as the vehicle by which they hope to make their own claims to whiteness through social frontiersmanship—they exhibit a mirror image of Turner’s own “tende[n]cy to cast the North American continent in feminine terms,” framing white women as territory to be claimed.<sup>92</sup> Such men find that conceiving of other individuals in such terms is as perilous as any act of geographic frontier negotiation, precisely and ironically because the women they encounter resist their own reduction to symbols of sociospatial conquest. At other times, relationships between men and women in the fiction of mid-century LA model the frontiersman’s paradoxical relationship with “civilization”—where women are essential to men’s performances of heteromascularity but simultaneously constitute a domesticating presence hostile to masculine individualism. In still further circumstances, women more actively challenge and threaten the bases of male characters’ efforts to construct their own identity on frontiersmanlike lines, because they themselves manifest the kinds of frontier characteristics that their male adversaries believe to be their own exclusive inheritance.