The Frontier and the Mythic Indian
Basics of the Myth(s)

- Indians were savage children in the natural wilderness, trapped in “the past”
- Indians lacked culture, reason, religion, science, writing, property, and rights
- Noble Savage vs. Savage Savage
  - Noble Savage: Proud and brave people but they were doomed to extinction.
  - Savage Savage: Ruthless, ignorant, no respect
- Europeans/whites brought civilization, reason, progress, and “the future”
- Private property, government, agriculture
Indians & Whites on “Frontier”

- Europeans went west to the frontier, which was a land of opportunity and freedom from the hard and oppressive European world
- Rugged Individualism, adventure, violence
- Garden of Eden, Agrarian Myth
  - Judeo-Christian origins
- Innocence and benevolent expansion
- Fate and Destiny / Re-invention of identity
- Icons: cowboy, Indian, gunslinger, lawman, covered wagon, log cabin, mountain man, “settlers,” farmer
Origins of the Myth: 1500-1700s

- American colonial writers:
  1. John Smith (1616), *Description of New England*
  2. William Bradford (1650), *Of Plymouth Plantation*
  3. William Byrd (1728), *History of the Dividing Line*

- Popular writings on the “frontier” and Indians, “primitive conditions, sensational events, dangers, wilderness, stout-hearted ‘settlers’ surviving against the odds, judgments of civilization and religion

- Thomas Jefferson’s “Agrarian Ideal”
Plays and Theater

- Robert Rodgers (1766), *Ponteach: or the Savages of America*, play based on French and Indian War and Appalachians
- Ann Julia Kemble Hattan (1794), *Tammany, a Serious Opera*
- Joseph Croswell (1802), *A New World Planted*
- John Augustus Stone (1829), *Metamora, or the Last of the Wampanoags*

- Noble Savage: benign, simple, primitive, doomed
- American identity, superiority, history, progress
Early Histories

- Francis Parkman (1851), *Conspiracy of Pontiac*
- Lewis Henry Morgan (1851) *League of the Iroquois*
- *McGuffey’s Reader*

- Popularized Indian-White conflict, frontier violence, savagery, conquest, national identity and progress
- American History as history of conquest, taming the wilderness, moving west, overcoming obstacles, uplifting Indians or crushing them.
- Westering as search for opportunity, democracy, land, equality, individualism, and freedom
Paintings and Engravings
Frontier Prototype (1823-1840s)

- James Fennimore Cooper
- *Last of the Mohicans*
- *The Deerslayer*
- *The Pioneer*
- *The Prairie*

- Natty Bumppo: romantic frontier hero of the wild.
- Half savage-civilized. Individualist, strong, true
...continued

- Davy Crockett & Daniel Boone
- Immortalized with folk-tales and stories
- Pop culture hero
- Wishes and dreams of imperial expansion
- Frontiersman
Explorers and Mountain Men

- Lewis and Clark
- Stephen Long
- John Fremont
- Zebulon Pike
- Jedediah Smith
- James Pattie
- Bill Williams
Freemont Expedition, WY
Pop Culture Representations
“The Indian and the Frontier” in 19th century painting

- George Catlin
- Karl Bodmer
- Albert Bierstadt
- Frederic Remington
- Charles Russell
- Thomas Moran

- Shaped public ideas of the west, lands, people
- Idealized, stereotypes,
Catlin, “Buffalo Hunt, Chase”
Catlin, “Indians attacking Grizzly”
Alfred Jacob Miller, 1840s
Manifest Destiny & Conquest
Race and Religion sanctioning conquest

- Convergence of politics, religion, race, economics, military
- Justify conquest
- Racial supremacy, anti-democratic?
- Gold at the end of the rainbow
- Emanuel G. Leutz (’62)
George Bingham, 1852, “Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers Through the Cumberland Gap”
Art and Manifest Destiny

- Art simplified conquest and visually expressed “peaceful” imperialism.
- Biased artist became “objective history” that future novelists used to support literary myths.
- Early deification and heroic myth-making
- Art=politics=patriotism
- Seth Eastman, 1840s
Paradoxical myth-making 1860s-90s

- Post Civil War
  - War “solved” the central contradiction of US history
- Rise of new icons such as the cowboy, outlaw, lawman, prostitute emerged while U.S. became industrial, modern, corporate nation-state
- **Cowboys:** wage laborers & industrial cattle
- **Outlaws:** In federal territories robbing trains which received federal welfare
- **Farmers:** Feeding urbanites and immigrants in the East, dependent on federal subsidies, tariffs
- **Rancher, Miner, Lumberjack:** Federal lands cleared by the federal gov’t through military
Frederick Jackson Turner

- University of Wisconsin
- 1893 the American Historical Association
- 1890: Census and the “frontier”
- Wounded Knee
- Chicago Exposition 1893
- History = social science professionalization
- Imperialism
Turner’s “Frontier”

Frontier process, ended
Social evolution
Free land
Individualism
Opportunity & improvement
Progress of the nation
American character
Democratic institutions
Meta-narrative
Impact of Turner Thesis

- Schoolbooks
- Movies & T.V.
- Newspapers
- Laws + legislation
- Domestic policy
- Foreign Policy
- Individualism
- “Exceptionalism”
Weaknesses of his frontier…?

- Eastern bias
- Exclusive: Indians, Mexicans, Chinese, Spain?
- Ignored interdependence of groups
- Manifest Destiny Part II
- Simplifies complexities, analytically dangerous
- U.S. as culmination of humanity
- Cultural hierarchies
- Democracy = expansion: endless expansion?
- Superiority and self-serving
- One sided and ultra-nationalistic
Industrial Nostalgia

- “Modern” technological, mechanical, corporate, urban, scientific, secular, professional
- Something “lost” in America
- Longing, missing the imagined past
- How to maintain rugged individualism while working for corporate America
- Land and democracy vs. urban America and interdependency
Re-Enacting the West

- 150 other shows
- Thrills & excitement
- Indians as aggressors
- Settlers as victims
- Conquerers as victims
- Re-writing history thru guilt and denial
- Patriotic/nationalistic
Rescuing the Masculine Frontier

- Theodore Roosevelt
  - Easterner turned Westerner
  - “The Strenuous Life”
  - *The Winning of the West*
  - Expansionist
  - Philippines, Cuba, etc

- Rugged male individualism in age of industrialization
- “Cowboy President”
Frederick Remington

- Sculptor and painter
- Easterner gone West
- Rugged, male, Anglo
- Easterners consumed his work, fundamentally shaping nation’s idea of the west
Gunfighter, early 1910s

Troopers on the Trail
Early Movies: “Westerns”

Edwin Porter (1903) *Great Train Robbery* had hold-ups, villains, shoot-outs, bad-good guys, adventure

- Cecil B. DeMille (1913) *Squaw Man*
- *The Gunfighter* (1917)
- James Cruze (1923) *The Covered Wagon*

- Teaching immigrants about American history
- Mass production, low culture, consumer culture
- Entertainment is not historical accuracy
- Standard stories about American greatness, progress, exceptionalism, simplification
Western Dime Novels

- Max Brand
- Clarence Mulford
- Zane Grey
- Louis L’Amour
- Larry McMurtry
- Tony Hillerman

- Recycling storylines for mass production
Dime Novels…
Teaching the Myth

- Textbooks, radio, and other “public education”
- Assimilation relied on consuming the myth
- Immigrant opportunity allegedly mirrored Western migrant experiences
- Western expansion became American history
Television: The 1950s & 1960s

- Constructing a modern American “hero”
- Gunsmoke, Bonanza, Little House on the Prairie, Lone Ranger, Maverick
- Cold War (good vs. bad)
- “Consensus” on American traditions & identity
- Unanimity = patriotism
- Diversity & skepticism = subversion
Movies: 1950s - 2003
John Wayne “The Duke”
Marketing the Myth

- Consumer culture
- Selling the idea of the American West by multinational corporations is antithetical to the image of individualism that capitalists market.
- Commodification of freedom and individualism
- Commodities symbolizing freedom in the West produced by communist China, countries lacking human rights and civil liberties
Consuming the West
Children and the West
Playing the West
Comic Books

- *Cowboys 'n' Injuns* No. 4
- *The Lone Ranger Rides Again*
Tourism and the Myth
The West in Daily Life

- Roy Rodgers to Shania Twain
- Rodeos, NASCAR, sports (Cowboys & Redskins)
- Automobiles, clothing, cologne, restaurants, “ranch style homes,” vacations, etc
- Military (Tomahawk, Apache, cavalry)
Cowboy Politics...modern

- Ronald Reagan
- New Dealer, anti-Communist
- Cowboy actor (Played George Custer)
- Cowboy President
- Life imitating art and myth of the West
- “Anti-big gov’t”
- “Won the Cold War”
George Bush, Cowboy President II

- Reinvention of identity to fit Western Iconography
- Connecticut Family
- Wealth enabled him to avoid Vietnam
- Father was career politician in “big government”
- Yale “educated”
- Failed oil man
- (Federal oil subsidies)
- Texas Rangers
- Cowboy hat, boots
- Wanted: Dead or Alive
- “Bring ‘em On”
- “Shoot from the hip”
- Chopping Wood
- Crawford Ranch
- Ford Pickup Truck
Persistence of the Myth

- American anti-intellectualism
- “Exceptionalism”
- “Lied to by very friendly people”
- American Dream: hard work, self-reliance, opportunity, righteousness,
- Not reality, but real hopes and dreams
- Simplification and feel good story
- Nationalistic and patriotic
Exclusions?

- Native people as intelligent actors defending their homes, families, heritage
- Mexicans, African Americans, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Pacific Islanders, Hawaii
- Twentieth century: Great Depression, Cold War, Civil Rights, the Sixties, etc
- Federal government, environmental history
- Class conflicts, strikes, farm workers,
- Corporate and industrial history
- Multi-dimensional, complex, ambiguous