

ON THE FRONTIER

This brief meditation, written in 1996 for the journal Frontiers, where it appeared as "Which Side Am I On, Anyway?" has been rewritten for this book.

THE FRONTIER

A frontier has two sides. It is an interface, a threshold, a liminal site, with all the danger and promise of liminality.

The front side, the yang side, the side that calls itself the frontier, that's where you boldly go where no one has gone before, rushing forward like a stormfront, like a battlefield. Nothing before you is real. It is empty space. My favorite quotation from the great frontiersman Julius Caesar: "It was not certain that Britannia existed, until I went there." It does not exist, it is empty, and therefore full of dream and promise, the seven shining cities. And so you go there. Seeking gold, seeking land, annexing all before you, you expand your world.

The other side of the frontier, the yin side: that's where you live. You always lived there. It's all around you, it's always been. It is the real world, the true and certain world, full of reality.

And it is where they come. You were not certain they existed, until they came.

Coming from another world, they take yours from you, changing it, draining it, shrinking it into a property, a commodity. And as your world is meaningless to them until they change it into theirs, so as you

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live among them and adopt their meanings, you are in danger of losing your own meaning to yourself.

In the wake of the North American frontier is where my father the anthropologist did his fieldwork, among the wrecks of cultures, the ruins of languages, the broken or almost-broken continuities and communities, the shards of an infinite diversity smashed by a monoculture. A postfrontiersman, a white immigrant's son learning Indian cultures and languages in the first half of the twentieth century, he tried to save meaning. To learn and tell the stories that might otherwise be lost. The only means he had to do so was by translating, recording in his foreign language: the language of science, the language of the conqueror. An act of imperialism. An act of human solidarity.

My mother continued his work with her history of a survivor of the frontier, the native Californian Ishi. I admire her book as deeply as I admire its subject, but have always regretted the subtitle, *A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America*, for it contradicts the sense and spirit of the story she tells. Ishi was not wild. He did not come out of the wilderness, but out of a culture and tradition far more deeply rooted and soundly established than that of the frontiersmen who slaughtered his people to get their land. He did not live in a wilderness but in a dearly familiar world he and his people knew hill by hill, river by river, stone by stone. Who made those golden hills a wilderness of blood and mourning and ignorance?

If there are frontiers between the civilized and the barbaric, between the meaningful and the unmeaning, they are not lines on a map nor are they regions of the earth. They are boundaries of the mind alone.

MY FRONTIERS

Innate or acquired, a delight in learning unfamiliar (foreign, alien, "wild") significances and an unwillingness to limit value or significance to a single side of the frontier have shaped my writing.

North Americans have looked at their future as they looked at

their Western lands: as an empty place (animals, Indians, aliens don't count) to be "conquered," "tamed," filled up with themselves and their doings: a meaningless blank on which to write their names. This is the same future one finds in much science fiction, but not in mine. In mine the future is already full; it is much older and larger than our present; and we are the aliens in it.

My fantasies explore the use of power as art and its misuse as domination; they play back and forth along the mysterious frontier between what we think is real and what we think is imaginary, exploring the borderlands.

Capitalism, which ceases to exist if it is not expanding its empire, establishes an ever-moving frontier, and its yang conquistadors forever pursue El Dorado. You cannot be too rich, they cry. My realistic fictions are mostly about people on the yin side of capitalism: housewives, waitresses, librarians, keepers of dismal little motels. The people who live, you might say, on the rez, in the broken world the conquistadors leave behind.

Living in a world that is valued only as gain, an ever-expanding world-as-frontier that has no worth of its own, no fullness of its own, you live in danger of losing your own worth to yourself. That's when you begin to listen to the voices from the other side, and to ask questions of failure and the dark.

I am a granddaughter of the American frontier. My mother's family moved and bought and farmed and failed and moved on, from Missouri to Wyoming to Colorado to Oregon to California and back. We followed yang; we found yin. I am grateful. My heritage is the wild oats the Spanish sowed on the hills of California, the cheatgrass the ranchers left in the counties of Harney and Malheur. Those are the crops my people planted, and I have reaped. There is my straw-spun gold.

READINGS