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Carl Abbott, *Imagined Frontiers: Contemporary America and Beyond* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015, \$19.95). Pp. x + 259, ISBN 978 0 8061 4836 6.

Carl Abbott is Professor Emeritus of Urban Studies and Planning at Portland State University and has published extensively on urban history and development. In *Imagined Frontiers* Abbott turns his attention to cultural representations of North American frontier landscapes, focusing particularly on the ways popular ideas about these spaces and their histories have been recycled and contested. Nearly the whole second half of *Imagined Frontiers* is devoted to discussions of science fiction texts, but this is still a wide-ranging, indeed, avowedly eclectic book: Abbott considers examples from popular and literary fiction, TV series, film, photography and performance art projects, as well as visual models deriving from scholarship on urban development. It also examines frontiers of quite different orders. The book's central section focuses on the classic continental frontier of American settlement, though each chapter – purposefully it would seem – eschews depictions of the Old West for more peripheral examples, from the south Florida wilds in Peter Matthiessen's historical fiction to contemporary reinventions of the Pacific Northwest. The book's opening section by contrast explores representations of late twentieth-century suburban development at the metropolitan frontier, and it concludes with a sequence of chapters exploring stories which imagine extra-terrestrial colonial settlement. The book also draws on diverse critical perspectives. The chapter on the 1993 feature film *Falling Down*, for instance, engages with material from gender studies and de Certeau's account everyday urban practice, and concludes with an illuminating interpretation of the film inspired by Xenophon's *Anabasis*. What dominates *Imagined Frontiers*, however, are Abbott's trenchant and energetic

analyses of his example texts, which are supported by an encyclopaedic knowledge of related material.

In his introduction Abbott declares that his intention for *Imagined Frontiers* is to put into a three-way dialogue popular understandings, scholarly knowledge and artistic reimaginings of 'places on the edge' in North America. However, from the very next sentence onwards he demonstrates that these categories are far from discrete. Nevertheless the book's preoccupation with 'dialogue' is an ongoing and productive concern. Many of Abbott's examples from the 1960s to the present are shown to critically engage with prevailing myths of the American West, deconstructing in particular dominant notions of heroic individualism and of the West as a *terra nullius*. For example, the book's opening chapter examines novels focused on real estate development in the Sunbelt Southwest and the arising conflicts between rapacious Anglo-American developers and longer-established Native American and Hispanic communities. Abbott clearly appreciates the excoriating satire of these fictions but suggests they over-estimate the importance of real estate development and contribute to a narrowed historical perspective of the region. In later chapters Abbott shows how diverse creations, from photography and performance art projects that respond to Portland's Urban Growth Boundary to Kim Stanley Robinson's sophisticated *Mars* trilogy, offer more complex, historically informed portraits. Moreover, these interventions both enact and enable discussions about how communities on the edge might best flourish in the present and the future. Otherwise, Abbott actively places different examples of imagined frontiers into dialogue with one another, such as in the chapter in which he contrasts suburban stories from the east and west coasts. Abbott identifies a representational strategy that is distinct to eastern suburban milieus. This is the 'transect', which involves

traversing a sprawling and seemingly disconnected landscape. Such movement enables suburbanites like Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe or John Updike's Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom to register the relationships between places, and the environment's broader history. By contrast, west coast narratives, evidenced by Douglas Coupland's early novels, insist on fragmentation – although noticeably in the following chapter Abbott considers the transect produced by the protagonist of *Falling Down* as he walks across Los Angeles.

Abbott does not shy away from interrogating questions of form and genre, and he is especially adept at charting the genealogies and intertextualities of diverse narratives, particularly the various modes of science fiction that he considers. In the chapter on refuge stories set in the Colorado Rockies, for instance, he shows how the remote mountain locations have fostered fantasies of isolation and social renewal. But because Colorado's wilderness has been rendered accessible by decades of tourism, many of these refuge narratives understand the high mountains first and foremost as a landscape of leisure; the tabula rasa, in other words, is often anything but. It is less clear why a whole chapter is devoted to the cult genre-blending TV show *Firefly*. Abbott suggests that Josh Weedon's creation is a complex text in which romantic notions of the pioneer experience are tempered by a more critical historical awareness. In an odd move, Abbott 'proves' his claim largely through a discussion of the 1958 western film *The Big Country*. Abbott also notes how *Firefly*'s universe is supposedly postracial, but doesn't attempt to examine the issue any further.

Eight of *Imagined Frontiers*' eleven chapters have been published previously, the earliest of which appeared in 2003. If the book's diverse chapters are meant to be in dialogue with one another, what is required is a more developed introduction

than the perfunctory one provided; the inclusion of a concluding chapter might also have helped clarify the book's theses. Indeed, the introduction fails to mention a key critical approach which informs many of the following chapters: the so-called new western history. And while Abbott acknowledges the salience of the concept of 'borderlands' in scholarly discussions, he does not engage with or even reference any of them. The introduction might also have offered a more developed conceptualisation of cultural reproduction as well as a definition of the popular. Despite these missed opportunities, however, Abbott's book amply demonstrates the persistence and complexity of the frontier imaginary in late twentieth and twenty-first-century America.

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