Fostering Fantasy: Imagining the Frontier

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What do we mean when we invoke the idea of “frontier”? If our information is drawn from the popular media, perhaps what comes to mind is the narration at the beginning of each Star Trek episode: “Space: the final frontier.” We might also begin with images of Cowboys and Indians duking it out in the American West – battles waged between civilization and barbarism in the tumultuous settlement of the
American frontier. While these examples are familiar stereotypes that perhaps go unnoticed in popular discourse, they nevertheless do provide a fruitful starting point for examining what we mean when we think, talk, or write about the frontier. Sometimes the best place to begin is with what you know, and then start asking why and how you know these things. Anthropologists take this a step further, thinking through their own “hows” and “whys” while engaging with and analyzing different ways of knowing and understanding. In this way, an anthropological consideration of the meanings of frontier may be able to contribute a more diverse and, perhaps, discordant understanding of frontier(s).

If we begin with the stereotypes in usages and invocations of frontier in order to understand its meanings, one of the most salient features is that frontiers are envisioned as meeting places – places of (peaceful or violent) negotiation and articulation. In particular, I would emphasize the idea of frontiers as sites of articulation. Building on the work of Stuart Hall (1996), both Anna Tsing (1999) and Tania Murray Li (2000) use the concept of articulation in their considerations of culture and natural resource management and of indigenous identity in Indonesia respectively. Tsing and Li find the concept of articulation to be particularly useful for a number of reasons, and I would argue that articulation applies well to considerations of frontiers too. Part of the utility of articulation as a term is its implied duality of meaning. Hall defines articulate as follows:

‘articulate’ means to utter, to speak forth, to be articulate... But we can also speak of an ‘articulated’ lorry (truck): a lorry where the front (cab) and back (trailer) can, but need not necessarily, be connected... An articulation is thus the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions (Hall 1996:141).

If we think about what the idea of frontier might articulate, Li’s identification of the “duality of positioning” captured by the concept of articulation is perhaps useful (2000:152). She posits that articulation implies “boundaries separating within from without, while simultaneously selecting the constellation of elements that characterize what lies within” (Li 2000:152). We might then understand frontier as articulating processes of differentiation and inclusion. If we think about frontier as a site of articulation insofar as it implies connection between or among things and people, we might then understand frontier as a site where elements are provisionally joined, and understand this conjunction as a product of specific cultural and historical circumstances.

If we envision frontier as a site of articulation, what articulates or is articulated at the frontier? On one level, if we consider the stereotype of the American frontier, we might seek to understand frontiers as junctures at which “nature” and “culture” meet. However, as Cronon (1995) identifies, constructing a dichotomy in which what is cultural (if we understand culture as unique to humans) is entirely separate from what is natural is ultimately paradoxical. It envisions humans and humanity as outside nature (Cronon 1995). If we imagine the existence of a frontier at which the cultural and natural intersect, we also must assume that there are sites at which the purity and segregation of nature and culture are maintained. Cronon argues that “everything we know about environmental history suggests that people have been manipulating the natural world on various scales for as long as we have a record of their passing” (1995:83); there are no untouched, natural regions. If we consider the positioning of indigenous peoples in this situation, in the rhetoric of ecological preservation they are often portrayed as negatively impacting formerly “pristine,” “balanced,” and “untouched” natural areas, and are thus relocated to more inhabited areas where they can presumably do less damage. As Cronon notes:

The movement to set aside national parks [in the United States]... followed hard on the heels of the final Indian wars, in which the prior human inhabitants of these areas were rounded up and moved onto reservations... [so] that tourists could safely enjoy the illusion that they were seeing their nation in its pristine, original state (1995:79).

Indigenous peoples may also occupy a grey area of sorts in environmental discourses that assume the
duality of nature and culture – indigenous peoples are heralded as examples of environmental management until they do something “unprimitive, modern, and unnatural” (Cronon 1995:85). In this case, indigenous peoples are perhaps situated as the embodiment of the frontier – the most natural of the cultural – and, as Li describes for the Lindu of Indonesia, the adoption of the label “indigenous” may be tied to political struggles in which they are positioned in relation to “historically sedimented practices, landscapes and repertoires of meaning” (2000:151). Alternatively, as Tsing (1993) discusses, in the case of the Meratus Dayaks of Indonesia, indigenous peoples can be characterized as mismanaging (in other words, not exploiting enough or in the proper way) the resources to which they have access, and are therefore relocated in order to provide increased opportunities for more extensive human development through the destruction of “natural” places. Thus, if we imagine frontiers as sites of articulation between nature and culture, what is articulated is a deep sense of illusory and paradoxical difference.

Frontiers might also be envisioned as sites where wilderness and civilization meet. In this equation, civilization is understood in a positivist sense as the culmination of a linear, evolutionary and historical process. Wilderness stands apart from civilization and is characterized as being without direction or history (Cronon 1995:80). Nevertheless, for Frederick Jackson Turner, writing in the nineteenth century, American history and identity were intimately tied to the existence of a frontier of wilderness (1972). American history could be broken down by examining successive frontiers (for example, the trading frontier versus the farming frontier), which articulated unevenly and produced a uniquely American history and identity (Turner 1972:11). Cronon refers to Turner’s analyses as constituting the foundation of a “national frontier myth” for Americans (1995:78), in which the frontier was an integral part of American history, but was also temporary and vanishing. According to Cronon, this national frontier myth inspired wealthy Americans to enjoy the wilderness while it lasted, and characterized the wilderness not as a site of labour or as a part of daily life (as poor, rural Americans or Native Americans might understand it) but as a “place of recreation,” a place to be consumed (1995:78). In doing so, this changed the articulation of wilderness and civilization at the frontier by producing a “wilderness that came to reflect the very civilization its devotees sought to escape... elite urban tourists and wealthy sportsmen projected their leisure-time frontier fantasies onto the American landscape and so created a wilderness in their own image” (Cronon 1995:79). Identifying frontier as a site of articulation between civilization and wilderness is thus as contradictory as it is explanatory.

It therefore seems very difficult to universally delineate what frontier means, to carve out a definition for a term whose usage is constantly slipping. Perhaps we can say, then, that frontier as a concept is a product of imagination: the task of trying to actually pin down the form and content of frontier largely proves illusory. The assertion that frontiers are imagined seems to imply the presence of an agent who does the imagining, such that frontiers are as much constructions as they are realities. Thinking about the American frontier in this way is perhaps illustrative. The ways in which the American frontier has been represented differ based on who is engaged in the act of representing it and on the historical, cultural and political context in which it is represented. On the one hand, the frontier was represented in popular American discourses as a site of social anomie, a lawless region in which it was “all to easy to lose oneself in moral confusion and despair” (Cronon 1995:70). The frontier imagined in this way was no place for a “lady”; the dangers of the frontier required “masculine” men, versed in brutality and who would pull no punches. On the other hand, the frontier was also represented as a site of unbridled opportunity at which true freedom and individualism could be achieved – a nationalist paradise. It was a place of new beginnings, a pure setting that was good and orderly. In Turner’s estimation, this was the setting for the birth of the American nation (1972:28). The American frontier could therefore simultaneously be “Satan’s home... [and] God’s own temple” (Cronon 1995:72). The ways in which it was represented thus differed based on whether the idea was to exclude segments of the population from the “brutality” of the frontier or to engage the population in a nostalgic remembrance of bygone days.

If we begin thinking about frontier as something that is imagined, perhaps it is also possible to think about frontier as a fantasy. In her analysis of globalization, Tsing (2000) suggests that
globalization might be envisioned as a fantasy, and that this technique can be both useful and analytically valuable:

My answer is that even fantasies deserve serious engagement. The best legacies of ethnography allow us to take our objects of study seriously even as we examine them critically... an ethnographic study of the global needs careful attention not only to global claims and their effects on social life, but also to questions of interconnection, movement and boundary crossing that globalist spokespeople have brought to the fore (Tsing 2000:351).

Tsing likens fantasies of the global to beliefs in ghosts; this also seems to apply well to considerations of frontiers. As with studying the belief in ghosts ethnographically, studying the frontier requires taking invocations of the frontier seriously. It requires observing usages, and questioning the symbolism of the frontier in these usages. Although the frontier may seem illusory, it is real in the sense that people believe in it and use it to understand their experiences. Engaging with the fantasy of the frontier “as an object of study requires both distance and intimate engagement” (Tsing 2000:351).

Thinking about the frontier as a product of imagination, as a fantasy, also means that we might assume that creativity is involved in such an endeavour. Might this creativity also be purposeful? My arguments thus far perhaps presaged this way of looking at frontiers, but at this point it seems important to make clear that I am by no means invoking a vision of frontiers as functional. Rather, I would reiterate that the ways in which the idea of frontiers has been used are embedded in relations of power and inequality that are historically and culturally situated. Recognizing that invocations of frontiers may be purposeful means that we might also, following Tsing, think of them as a “set of projects” that necessitate us to “imagine space and time,” as well as relations between people and things, in certain ways (2000:351). Tsing identifies the power that these projects might wield, and locates them as deserving of our attention. Perhaps the frontier project that we might envision involves what Tsing (1999) defines as “cultural mobilization” in her discussion of natural resource management:

To understand environmental conflicts in this way we need attention to culture... Conflicts over natural resource management are “cultural” not only because they pit opposing perspectives, values, and ways of life against each other; they also require the “mobilization” of one’s own position, that is, the formulation and reformulation of the problem, the groups involved, and the appropriate forms of representation through which the argument should be addressed (Tsing 1999:6).

Thinking about visions of the frontier as mobilizations of ways of knowing that articulate with each other, and, in doing so, remake each other is useful when trying to understand why pitting binary, static “elements” against each other at an imagined frontier is problematic. In particular, we might recognize here that creation and imagination do not run one way in this equation. Culture and nature, civilization and wilderness are not mutually exclusive, nor do they define the boundaries of frontier without contestation. People are an integral part of the relations constitutive of frontier: if we define and imagine frontier, we are also defined and are shaped by frontier. In this way, identities articulate and are articulated at the frontier. “Places [and people] are made through their connections with each other, not their isolation” (Tsing 2000:330), yet “‘society’ and ‘environment’ never confront each other as seamless wholes” (Fisher 1996:168).

Mary Louise Pratt, in her discussion of the relationship between modernity and periphery, finds it helpful to think about modernity as Europe’s (or at least the “white world’s”) identity discourse (2002:27). Markers of identity discourses include the “need for narratives of origins, distinctive features, and reified Others, and the policing of boundaries combined with the slippery capacity to create and erase otherness as needed” (Pratt 2002:28). If we define identity discourses in this way, the invocation of frontier can be seen as an identity discourse. Those invoking or imagining the frontier carve out their identity in relation to those located “at” the frontier (most often these are politically, economically and geographically marginalized peoples). What this “Othering” of peoples at the
frontier, which is part and parcel of frontier identity discourse, tends to obscure is the ability of these people to talk back and thus to shape others’ identities. In relation to modernity and periphery, Pratt writes:

[the] incompatibility of the metropolitan attempt to both produce subjects on the periphery and to maintain their alterity... between the imperative, on the one hand, to fix others in order to define itself and, on the other hand, to modernize others through processes of assimilation (Pratt 2002:28).

Li argues that it is rather facile to assume that representation only flows one way, and that “by paying attention to the process of articulation it is possible to appreciate opportunities as well as constraints, and the exercise of agency in these encounters” (2000:173). Tsing (1993) provides an example from her fieldwork among the Meratus Dayaks of South Kalimantan, Indonesia, in which the identity discourse of the Indonesian state is subverted by the Meratus as it is simultaneously reflected back at it. Through reorganizing eating habits, the state attempted to introduce new values to the Meratus, including respect for “science (nutrition) and administration (personal discipline)” (Tsing 1993:93). This was done through nutrition and cooking demonstrations.

Meratus stage spectacles of beautiful cooking too – for spirits. In these events, correct cooking demonstrates an appreciation for order as well, yet the state’s agenda is subtly transformed. The state’s disciplinary order, with its daily monotony, becomes a sporadic celebratory order which enlivens without imprisoning its participants (Tsing 1993:94).

The Meratus do not envision themselves as Others to the Indonesian state, and therefore subtly and creatively craft their own identity through the subversion and reshaping of state imperatives. If we only talk about power as moving one way at the frontier, these processes are necessarily obscured.

Richard H. Grove (1996), in his discussion of the rise of environmentalism, points out that colonial environmental projects did not consist of the colonial administration imposing its enlightened understanding of ecology on the tabula rasa of indigenous peoples occupying the newly-defined colonial territories (in his discussion, tropical islands). Rather, ideas and policies concerning environmentalism were formulated in the colonies; this type of knowledge and scientific environmental investigation emerged on the “periphery,” in marginal realms earlier than in “metropolitan centres,” and it was largely influenced by the work of people at the “frontier” who had very different, arguably anti-colonial, motivations (Grove 1996:479). In this case, knowledge(s) and expertise(s) were not imparted by the colonial state to the ignorant masses. Rather, they articulated with each other and were articulated such that the hegemony of the colonial state in this case was incomplete and opened up the possibility of envisioning frontier articulation and collaboration. My use of “collaboration” in this context is closely related to Tsing’s (1999) usage in which she notes that collaboration can indicate cooperative work among colleagues or enemies, and that collaboration does not necessarily refer to a positive interaction. If we think about hegemonic relations that might occur at frontiers, like those between the Meratus and the Indonesian state, we must realize that while people’s self-definitions and actions are constrained by these relations, hegemony in this sense is collaborative and therefore always incomplete.

If we consider frontiers to be imagined sites at which identities and ways of knowing are articulated and articulate with each other, might we also consider that the element of scale might be an important variable in the equation? Interaction at the frontier has traditionally been structured such that “global” forces and interests are contrasted to “local” specificity. From the outset, the relations are characterized as uniformly oppressive for local peoples, and the categories of people are portrayed as homogeneous. Tsing (1993; 1999; 2000) reminds us that there are always internal contradictions and struggles within these categories of scale, such that relations within and between different scales are fluid and often unpredictable. For example, Tsing (1993) points to the dynamism and struggles inherent in “being” a Meratus: her friend and “informant” Uma Adang, a controversial female shaman, no more conforms to nor represents “local” sensibilities or Meratus identity than a wage labourer conforms to or
represents "global capitalism." Treating the global and local as coherent and dichotomous obscures the myriad differences within them and the variety of "scales" between them. Imagined articulations at the frontier "involve lots of other categories and combinations," which are, in turn, "produced as results of contingent articulations" (Tsing 1999:26). Tsing warns that as frequently as we start by examining groups or organizations at certain scales and examining how they articulate, we must also examine the inverse and consider the ways in which articulated categories are set up, "creating groups that could not be named in advance" (Tsing 1999:26). Thus, we might imagine that the scales articulated and articulating at frontiers are far more complex than the categories devised to describe them.

Although the understanding of the meaning of frontier "articulated" in this paper perhaps operates at a higher level of abstraction than accounts that stress concrete dualities, embracing complexity and incongruities allows for the formulation of new paths of inquiry. This consideration of frontiers is by no means complete; my objective in this paper was to begin to investigate conventional usages of the idea of frontier and to question their utility outside of the contexts in which they were formulated. If we discard the binaries that have been traditionally postulated as constituting the form and content of frontiers, and begin to think about frontiers as more malleable and conflicting, we come closer to understanding the experiences of people at these frontiers. Thinking about frontiers as fantastical sites of articulation and collaboration, at which identities are represented, contested and reformed, also brings us closer to denaturalizing and re-politicizing its usage.

Bibliography


