The Only Good Alien Is a Dead Alien: 
Science Fiction and the Metaphysics of Indian-Hating on the High Frontier

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Maybe the moon will serve our purpose; or Mars; maybe up and out will turn out to be a true archetypal equivalent to the Way West.... But unless "stern and imperturbable" Martians await us, or lovely and complaisant lady Lunatics—as certain makers of science fiction have already tried to assure us—whom we can assimilate to our old myths of the Indian, Outer Space will not seem an extension of our original America, the America which shocked and changed Europe, but a second, a meta-America, which may shock and change us.

—Leslie Fielder

_The Return of the Vanishing American_ (27)

Students of myth and culture have long been interested in the "life cycle" of national fables. Born of the womb of cultural necessity, myths commonly mature and adapt to fit changing cultural conditions, until, after sometimes centuries of service, they outlive their usefulness and die away. The most persistent myth in American culture, that of the frontier, has shown remarkable resiliency in its life cycle. Emerging first in the 18th century as an explanatory device for defining and rationalizing the expansion of the United States westward, the frontier myth dominated the popular culture of the nation throughout the 19th century and has played a major role in helping to shape national expressions of "self" in the 20th. As early as the 1890s, historians such as Frederick Jackson Turner described the loss of the physical characteristics on which the myth was based, and some assumed that the end of the frontier implied the demise of its attendant mythology (Turner 1). But myths rarely die easily, and the frontier myth has retained its validity as an allegorical device for explaining the spiritual mission of the culture despite the erasure of its material preconditions.

Early-20th-century promoters breathed new life into an aging myth, for instance, by encouraging the search for frontiers beyond the California coast, particularly in imperialistic forays into the Pacific rim (Drinnon 307-32). But the tired myth was revitalized more fully still by the discovery of new territories for the extension of mythopoeic impulses—this time not in geographic space but in outer space. This particular manifestation of the myth suggests the important relationship between technological innovation and the extension of myth life-cycles. It was improved means of transportation (the Conestoga wagon, the steamboat, the railroad) that gave new life to the frontier myth in the 19th century by allowing nearly all Americans to envision the West as a physical and accessible place rather than merely as an abstract, mythic construction. The invention of the airplane only a decade after the closing of the frontier created a similar sense of connection to mythic "place," even if the average American of that era never experienced flight in the lower stratosphere. Like so much prairie wilderness, the skies appeared to be at least a potentially viable place for the renewal of expansionist American impulses associated with Manifest Destiny and world domination.

As early as the first decade of the twentieth century, the United States government was actively involved in the development of technologies necessary for the control of "lower space," and by the second decade of the century, American domination of the skies was credited as a major factor in the Allied victory in World War I. Military and later passenger air travel were embraced by Americans long before they were by Europeans, in part because the promotional language on behalf of control of space by airline advertisers seemed so familiar to Americans accustomed to the "boosterism" of frontier boomtown agents. Americans simply projected upward and outward where they had once projected westward.

It should come as no surprise to find that in this process of mythic conversion, the language of the western frontier was adapted to fit the needs of a new generation of entrepreneurs and champions of the popular culture of space. When promoters searched for an appropriate vocabulary to describe the new sphere of American domination, that is, they found a
ready-made one in the tired but still functional traditions of the western. The connections between western "flight" and aeronautic "flight" had already been anticipated by dime novelists, some of whom found it easy enough to transform western cowboys into space cowboys, high-noon gunfights into celestial shootouts, and frontier expansion into the politics of space ownership on the high frontier.

The author of late-19th-century dime novel, the *Brave and Bold* (Figure 1), for instance, allowed readers to imagine that white settlers trapped inescapably along high cliffs might elude their Indian pursuers by fashioning crude mechanical wings and gliding to safety. It may be significant that in this early popular literature of space travel, so similar in ways to the captivity and flight narratives of the early frontier, that the Indians are successful in bringing "back down to earth" the modern-day Icaruses who try to escape them. But as with the literature of Mary Rowlandson and Daniel Boone, the white captives are vindicated in the end, not only making successful escapes despite their aborted flights but paving the way for the destruction of their captors (Dennett "Two Young Inventors").

Comic-book innovator Frank Reade experimented over and over again with this formula of capture and flight in his tales of unlikely "flying submarines" which occasionally helped settle disputes on the western frontier (Senarens) (Figure 2). And American audiences found it perfectly natural that Wilbur Wright would emplot his own experiences with flight by reference to the metaphorical language of the mythic frontier. "The desire to fly is an idea handed down to us by our ancestors," he wrote, "who, in their grueling travels across trackless lands, looked enviously on the birds soaring freely through space, at full speed, above all obstacles, on the infinite highway of the air" (Wright 25).

Perhaps no work demonstrates the potential for transference between the mythic vocabularies of the West and Space better than Owen Wister's 1902 classic, *The Virginian*. Written at a time when Turner's "West" had been pronounced dead, Wister's book was intended to capitalize on the twin feelings of nostalgia and anxiety that accompanied the loss of the physical underpinnings of the dominant frontier mythology. Wister's own vision of the West as recorded in the journal passages from his 1885 trip to Wyoming shows considerable allegorical tendencies in this regard. Traveling for miles "[h]rough the piled rocks where the fire has risen straight out of the crevices," Wister wrote of the western landscape, "[i]t's like what scenery on the moon must be" (ix). This lunar analogy resurfaced in *The Virginian*, where the hero and his new bride, Molly, flee to a moon-like oasis in the Wyoming foothills in pursuit of "another world" in which to spend their honeymoon. Traveling ever upward, in a spiraling ascent through the mountains of "red rocks" to a "circle of seclusion," they arrive at a place where the "whole world" appears "far" away (379, 384-85, 381). The couple momentarily indulges in escapist fantasies about a perpetual retreat from frontier realities, but even in this lunar refuge the real world continues to intrude. Far from representing an escape valve from practical concerns, this honeymoon retreat becomes a reminder in the end that they must descend back to the earth and take part in the daily business of getting a living. "[T]he trouble is, I am responsible," the Virginian notes, and responsibility becomes his great anchor, the gravitational force that metaphorically pulls him back to Earth (384). He is truly, as Wister notes in his preface to *The Virginian*, "a hero without wings" (xlviii).

In traditional western literature, only Indians seem even marginally capable of escaping "responsibility," and they are conspicuously absent from Wister's morality play. While Wister evinces sympathy in his novel for the "Indian" view of nature as expressed occasionally through white spokesmen and women, he withdraws from the full implications of that philosophy, since the frontier myth on which he depended had at its heart a Judeo-Christian rejection of Nature and Nature's God. Our national myths require too many concessions to primitive accumulation, ownership, and control, Wister understood, to allow for a symbiotic relationship between frontiersman and land. In the works of western popularizers like Wister, Zane Grey, and others, Nature must be metaphorically cast as an obstacle to be overcome, as a stream to be forded, a prairie to be fenced, a path to be forged, and a native people to be annihilated. The destruction of the Indians, in particular, symbolized in an extreme form the American inheritance of this Judeo-Christian attitude toward Nature, since the Indians came to represent "red savages" or "red devils" placed on this Earth as punishment for sins committed and as barriers to resurrection and renewal.

As Richard Drinnon and others have shown, these attitudes toward Native Americans reflected a "metaphysics of Indian-hating" (Melville's phrase), a philosophy of rejection and vilification which amounted to a veritable leitmotif in American literature. Indians became a reflection of nightmare fears on the part of whites about the vindictive quality of Nature. As the "children of Nature," Indians and
Dick had been struck in the side by one of the arrows, and was falling to his doom like a meteor.

Fig. 1. Brave and Bold. Reprinted courtesy of the Library of Congress.
Fig. 2. *Frank Reade*. Photograph reprinted courtesy of the Library of Congress.
the West evoked simultaneous images of infantile regression, irresponsibility and destructive narcissism; they were the "dark others that white settlers were not and must not under any circumstances become." Hence, an Indian-hater like John Fiske, who referred to Indians as "so nasty, villainous, and vile" that they "must be seen, in order to be believed," had little trouble adopting Wister's lunar metaphor in the service of racial genocide and expulsion (qtd. in Drinnon 232). Searching for the appropriate language to reference the twin horrors he felt in the face of both Indians and Nature in the West, Fiske wrote to his eastern friends that the western Indians had rightly been consigned to uneartly places of "utter desolation," places where "terrible mountains, casting their sharp black shadows across the blazing sunshine are the very mountains I have seen through the telescope in the moon!" (232).

Here then we see a distinct phase in the life and death of a cultural myth. In chronicling the somber realities of a dying frontier, Wister capitalized temporarily on the region's romantic associations with decline and decay. But nostalgia for the irrecoverable could not sustain the myth permanently. If the West and the savage Indian seemed to be losing their power as legitimate and verifiable symbols of tension and regenerative force in American culture, then writers who wished to employ frontier mythologies were forced to work with increasing ingenuity and risk. Science fiction writers took the lead in this matter, focusing on outer space travel as a new milieu for the renewal of frontier mentalities and on aliens as metaphoric Indians victimized by an ethic of conquest extended into new arenas of discovery and suspense. Edgar Rice Burroughs, for instance, made a career out of capitalizing on bizarre "outer space" variations of the frontier myth, and not surprisingly he was indebted to Wister's Virginian for his vision of the West. Having read Wister's novel five or six times, he wrote: "I believe The Virginian to be one of the greatest American novels ever written, and though I have heard that Mr. Wister deposes having written it I venture that a hundred years from now it will constitute his sole link to Fame—and I am sure that The Virginian will live a hundred years, if the Bolshevists and the I.W.W. permit civilization to endure that long" (qtd. in Porges 368). The references to these "red agencies" were more than just fortuitous, for Burroughs viewed the conflict between democratic capitalism and "lost world traditions," represented by antiquated races or ideologies, as the most natural and dramatic source for literary representation. Whether writing about Tarzan and the laws of the African jungle or about the steady decline of Indians on the American frontier, Burroughs understood the need to play out the inevitable but still thrilling consequences of the clash of cultures and races. And the vocabulary of Wister's West was the most readily available for this purpose. A case in point is the "John Carter Martian" series, penned by Burroughs in more than a dozen installments over several decades in the years just prior to and following World War I. The first and most derivative of these was A Princess of Mars, in which Burroughs transplanted Wister's western characters and themes onto the landscape of Mars. The book begins with a descriptive account of the series' hero, John Carter, who is clearly modeled after Wister's Virginian. Both are originally from Virginia, both are "tall, dark, smooth-faced, [and] athletic" (v); both have characteristic jet black hair and steel gray eyes; both are true southern gentlemen with a slight tendency toward "wild recklessness" (v); both go West to seek their fortunes after the Civil War; and both encounter violence and resistance on the frontier from racial antagonists. Revealingly, A Princess of Mars begins in Wister's wild west, which literally becomes a takeoff point for the narrative. In the opening scenes, John Carter is confronted by a band of Indians—"vicious marauders" who take "their toll in lives and torture of every white party which fell into their merciless clutches" (12-13). Armed with two Colt revolvers and a carbine, Carter stumbles onto the camp of hundreds of these "red rascals" (13) who have murdered his companion, and in a maneuver worthy of the best western melodrama, he steals the mutilated body away from the Indians while at full gallop by grasping his friend's cartridge belt and lifting him across the withers of his mount. After a chase through the wilderness, Burroughs's hero is cornered in a cave, where, on the verge of discovery and sure death, he is magically teleported out of danger, to the planet Mars.

Reminiscent of the winged escape of white settlers in the "Brave and the Bold," this western opening then sets the stage for the parallel structure of Carter's frontier adventures in outer space. Approached by Martians of a decidedly hostile nature, Carter notes that they bear a "startling resemblance" to "a band of the red Indians of my own Earth" and associates them with "those warriors who, only the day before," had chased him through the American desert (24). Throughout the opening chapters of this science fiction classic, Burroughs makes constant use of the mental convergence between symbols of Wister's West and Carter's Mars, and, by doing so,
evokes an entire series of associations in the minds of his American readers about the place of marauding “tribes” of “red men” in hostile environments.

From the perspective of the evolution of myth, A Princess of Mars is interesting since it suggests both the stability and adaptability of archetypal fables. On the one hand, for instance, Burroughs’s novel was crammed full of thematic and character descriptions that were easily recognizable to 20th-century readers of western dime-novels. After heroically fending off dozens of Martian savages who attack him unmercifully, for instance, Carter is eventually captured by them and taken to their “leaders,” who come to admire his courage and bravado and adopt him as one of their own in accordance with the conventions of western captivity narratives. Additionally Carter wins the love and admiration of a Martian female, Dejah (deja vu?), and their relationship evinces the theme of miscegenation so standard to the subtextual plots of many western novels. And the aliens of Mars, particularly the “red Martians,” are killed off with such nonchalance and at such a high frequency that readers of A Princess of Mars made an easy equivalence between Burroughs’s science fiction morality and the standard western philosophy that “the only good Indian is a dead Indian.” On the other hand, Burroughs’s version of the frontier myth required a greater suspension of belief than generally expected in dime novels, as readers were asked to accept the prospect of teleporting, of life on an oxygenless planet, and of hovering space ships and laser guns. Clearly escapist in its implications, the western myth in this guise contained more than hazy and nostalgically romanticized features of a once identifiable frontier. It had become metamorphosed into a fantastic tale of chase and pursuit which bore little resemblance to reality other than in its structural and thematic conditions. That A Princess of Mars was so popular suggests that readers were willing to embrace frontier ideologies in any form, even those in bizarre and increasingly sensationalized packages. Science fiction as a genre benefited from these tendencies, since it offered both the suspended imagination of pure “fiction” and the ostensible credibility of “quasi-science.”

Carter’s space adventure ends with the hero’s traditional return to “civilization,” although unlike the coupled destinies of the Virginian and Molly, Carter is forced, presumably because of the interracial quality of his love relationship, to return without Dejah. Disoriented, lonely and lost in his earthly home along the Hudson, Carter becomes a Rip Van Winkle of sorts, expiring exactly 20 years to the day he fell asleep in an Arizona cave and raising the suggestion that his adventures in Mars have only been part of a long, bizarre dream. Had Burroughs abandoned his hero to a Hudson River crypt, never to raise him up again, one might have been justified in questioning the author’s literary commitment to the frontier myth as projected onto space. But Burroughs purposely buried his Rip character in a vault with a door which could be opened only from the inside, suggesting that Carter would be resurrected from the dead, Christ-like (note the initials, J.C.), to adventure still more in the wilderness of Mars.

In subsequent novels, Burroughs not only explored the rich texture of frontier mythologies extrapolated into space, he even returned the series to its literary roots, bringing the formulaic qualities of frontier literature to bear on themselves in revealing ways. In 1927 Burroughs published The War Chief, a tale about Indians on the western frontier with striking textual similarities to his successful Martian tales (Figure 3). Straining the traditional western themes of Wister through the filter of space adventure, Burroughs now gave his Indians nearly superhuman powers, “Martian-like” energies which were combated by frontiersmen with the wit and scientific ingenuity of space travelers. In bringing his John Carter series full circle back to the American West, Burroughs demonstrated how fully ingrained frontier philosophies were in the minds of American readers and how completely Indians retained their vitality as a functioning symbol of hate and subjugation for American culture.

If, despite the flexibilities of the original mythic formula, Burroughs’s work still seemed too elastic for some, greater familiarity with air travel after World War I helped to ground the myth sufficiently enough in reality to provide a necessary level of plausibility for the continuance of science fiction literature. World War I provided a clear example of the importance of “air control” and the need for “gunfighters in the sky,” while the civilian applications of flight were strikingly confirmed in the first coordinated air mail service in the 1920s. A very daring and dangerous proposition, this aeronautic pony express of sorts produced a new breed of heroes, including most prominently, Charles Lindbergh. The great value of Lindbergh’s subsequent trans-Atlantic flight was not simply its tribute to human endurance or aeronautic technology—these he had demonstrated in his mail service runs—but in its ability to render palpable the myth of space travel. Lindbergh’s actions, significantly flavored with western origins (his nickname was “Slim” and his airship was “The Spirit of St. Louis”), evoked a
Fig. 3. *The War Chief*. Photograph reprinted with permission of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Inc.
constellation of mythic associations that suggested the direct lineage between Greek, medieval, western and 20th-century space-hero metaphors. Biographers referred to Lindbergh as the “Bellerophon on Pegasus,” “The Knight of the Air,” “The Fair-Haired Boy,” “The Lone Scout of the Sky,” and “The Last Hero.”

Lionized by hundreds of patriotic groups and organizations, Lindbergh suggested not only the plausibility but the attainability of a new, more fertile landscape for the revitalization of older frontier mythologies. Biographer James West referred unabashedly to Lindbergh as the “The Lone Pathfinder,” a mythic hero, who, in “blazing a trail through the arch of the sky called to the blood of the pioneer in every American boy” (13). Americans of the late 1920s were so desperate to link him through historical pageantry and mythic posturing to traditional symbols of American conquest, in fact, that some odd and embarrassing inversions of the traditional formulas occurred. In Cincinnati, Lindbergh was honored by the Ku-ni-eh Society, an honor society of the Boy Scouts, whose red-faced (but conspicuously white-handed) members presented him with an Indian war bonnet in recognition of his achievements (Figure 4). The symbolic act seemed to imply an official sanctioning by Native Americans of the “Lone Eagle’s” epic journey, a form of tribal recognition and installation of the sort that Daniel Boone and other respected frontiersmen experienced. In actuality, Indians were at that time working to disassociate themselves from the male-bonding activities of white American youths in the Boy Scouts, who not only excluded Indians from membership, but who worshipped, ironically, this “Columbus in reverse” (West 21-22).

If greater familiarity with air travel provided the necessary level of plausibility for the sufficient grounding of myth in reality, it also demystified, to an extent, the “heroic” aspects of the myth. On the western frontier, the cowboy-hero enjoyed his greatest reputation as a symbolic figure while the wildernesses through which he moved were mainly mysterious and unknown to his audiences. As Americans gained familiarity with the West, the cowboy lost some of his aura and was occasionally even debunked by those who characterized him as a fraud and a charlatan. Viewed as an uncultivated, uneducated, and violent renegade, escaping civilization rather than taking responsibility for its reform, the western hero of Wister’s making had been periodically criticized by western critics who saw nothing of themselves in such romanticized portraits. By the post-World War II era, similar doubts were being raised about the heroes of the new spatial frontiers. The tragic after-effects of the Atomic Bomb, the chilling climate of the Cold War, and the excesses of the Space Race caused some to question the social implications of the nation’s prevailing mythic ideologies. Expressing sympathy for racial victims of expansionary American policies, critics drew analogies between the policies of racial genocide enacted against the Indians on the American frontier and those used against the Japanese during World War II. Japanese-Americans were forced, like reservation-bound Indians, to live in debilitating internment camps, they noted, while the extermination of masses of Japanese civilians in the raids on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had obvious parallels to the massacre of Indians on the open plains by the United States Army. Science fiction writers were among the first to voice these suspicions, expressing concern that the negative qualities of the original western mythology might be recapitulated dangerously in postwar infatuations with outer space (Pauly 257).

In The Martian Chronicles, for instance, Ray Bradbury depicted the clash between space-traveling Americans and native Martians in the language of western conflict and conquest. Fleeing a war-racked Earth, American astronauts under Captain Wilder (the conscious embodiment of both Wister’s Virginian and Burroughs’s John Carter), survey the planet Mars for possible colonization. Like their prototypes on the American frontier, Bradbury’s space travelers pave the way for their own Empire-building by spreading infectious disease, which unintentionally but effectively destroys the helpless Martians. Within a few short years of this first fatal epidemiological encounter, the planet is “terraformed” by an enterprising Johnny Appleseed figure, and the outcroppings of boom cities begin to appear. In imitation of the aggressive recruiting efforts of the railroad companies and the United States government in the 19th century, 21st-century space promoters encourage would-be migrants with posters declaring “THERE’S WORK FOR YOU IN THE SKY: SEE MARS!” (72).

The remainder of Bradbury’s novel is a highly compacted, intensely critical examination of the tale of the Old West as retold on Mars. Preserving the conventional language of the frontier myth, Bradbury turned its tropes and metaphors in on themselves to reveal the shallow and mercurial properties of America’s predominant cultural construct. Bradbury’s westernized boom towns on Mars, for instance, expose the perverse ability of Americans to “beat” any “strange world into a shape...familiar to the eye,” to “bludgeon away all strangeness” in conformity to the
Fig. 4. Lindbergh honored by the Ku-ni-eh Society. Photograph reprinted courtesy of the Boy Scouts of America.
structural imperatives of the myth (78). In remote sections of Mars, prefabricated communities emerge with derivative names like “Boot Hill” and “Red Town,” and monuments are erected in them commemorating battles between the first discoverers and their Martian deterrents. One enterprising entrepreneur even attempts to reinstall the fading literary myths of war-racked Earth by building his own “House of Usher” on Mars. This radical application of fictional narrative structures to the conditions of life in space is foiled by the Investigator of Moral Climates, with the revealing name Pat Garrett, who arrives from Earth to shoot the owner’s “literary lies and flights of fancy...in mid-air” (106) as surely as the original Pat Garrett ended the short and charismatic career of Billy the Kid. Some Martian towns degenerate predictably into the ghost towns of a “tomb planet,” peopled by modern day panhandlers and has-beens, who frequent dusty saloons, live in remote shacks in the blue Martian hills, and wait for the day when “ten thousand rockets” will arrive with 100,000 Mexicans and Chinese on them, necessary to revitalize the planet with cheap labor (133). The changing face of this mutated Martian landscape serves as a reminder to Bradbury’s readers of the ease with which myths can sometimes spill over into distorting anti-myths.

If Mars’s “staged” physical appearance suggests the contrived, movie-backdrop quality of frontier myths transposed onto other planets, then Bradbury’s critique of social relations on Mars reveals a still greater hollowness at the core of the nation’s dominant mythology. In order to expose the shallowness of a tradition which proclaims that “the only good alien is a dead alien,” Bradbury introduces a singular explorer, Spender, who tries to protect the Martians from the kind of cultural annihilation experienced by Native Americans on Earth. An archaeologist by trade, Spender explores the ancient Martian ruins and discovers in them, as many anthropologists did in Native-American villages, indications of advanced civilization. He then “goes native,” adopting the Martian language and turning vigilante against his former cowboy companions. While Captain Wilder’s men revel in their discoveries by shooting off their guns, drinking alcohol, dancing around makeshift campfires to the sounds of “Whittie’s” harmonica, and eating spacemen-food prepared barbeque style by “Cookie,” Spender retreats to the Martian wilderness and returns a week later to murder them. Calling himself the “Last Martian” (58), Spender asks some penetrating questions of his victims before he puts them to death. “How would you feel if you were a Martian and people came to your land and started tearing it up?” (29), he argues. Only one explorer named Cherokee, a descendent of Indians from Oklahoma, expresses sympathy for the Martians, and outraged by the insensitivities of the rest of his fellow explorers, Spender becomes a gun-wielding, justice-seeking, western outlaw. He guns down one man named Biggs with his “holstered pistol” which he keeps in a leathered sheath strapped to his leg, cowboy style. Dying in the best, melodramatic fashion of western dime novels, Biggs pauses a second before he slides to a watery grave in a Martian canal. “The gun had made only a whispering hum,” Bradbury writes in imitation of Wister, Zane Grey and others, and “Spender shoved [it] into its holster and walked soundlessly away” (58).

Not even Cherokee is spared from this bloody and vindictive rampage. When the Indian objects to the murders of his companions, Spender accuses him of being corrupted by his Anglo-friends. “Of all of them, I thought you would understand” (60), Spender notes, but when Cherokee reaches for his gun, he too is killed. Captain Wilder and the remaining men go on a classic manhunt into the hills, where they surround the vigilante and finally kill him with a bullet through the heart in strict accordance with the code of the West. The transformation of the Martian landscape, like that of the American West, results directly from this encounter, and as Spender predicted, the vestiges of the rich Martian life are permanently lost. Ever in search of new frontiers, Captain Wilder heads to Jupiter, while those who remain behind systematically destroy the planet.

Bradbury’s The Martian Chronicles constituted an important event in the life-cycle of the frontier myth, since it debunked the ruling ideology of the frontier in the language of the myth itself. Showing signs of fatigue and wear, the prevailing national fable threatened to collapse under its own weight in imitation of countless other myths that had outlived their usefulness. And Bradbury was not the only artist to expose the dark underside of the space frontier myth and the prevailing metaphysics of Indian-hating that sustained it. By the late 1950s and early 60s filmmakers were active in debunking the false aura of American space cowboys, none more savagely and more insightfully than Stanley Kubrick in Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb. In this farcical movie about Cold War strategic defense systems, Kubrick parodied the western gunfighting hero in the figure of “Slim” Pickens, a cowboy-pilot whose dedication to mission is so complete that he refuses to withdraw from a
nuclear bombing raid on the Soviet Union despite obvious signs that no such strike is warranted. Inspired to action by a paranoid Army general, Pickens ignores official and unofficial demands that he turn back, and when his mission appears to be short-circuited by the failure of his plane’s bomb doors, Pickens enters the bomb shoot like a cowboy at a bronco-busting rodeo, and spurs the atomic bomb into action. Riding the bomb to earth with his cowboy hat in hand, Slim Pickens lets fly a boisterous cowboy Ya-hoo, his own imminent death (and the subsequent destruction of the Earth) subsidiary in his mind to the joy of the ride and a sense of mission completed. Pickens’s short-sided and bulldogging actions are directed at the Red Communists, who become, of course, the metaphoric Indians whom he feels he must exterminate at any cost. In terms of the myth of the frontier, Kubrick’s dark comedy provides a striking example of how satire often proves the most effective way of introducing unsettling critiques of prevailing myth systems. Nervous laughter of this sort was also a mainstay in the frontier melodramas popular throughout the East in the late-19th century.

In view of the savage attacks by Bradbury, Kubrick, and others, and the popularity of science fiction critiques of dominant frontier themes, many expected the Cold War era would witness a reconfiguring of the matrix of mythologies operating in American culture. But doubts about the staying power of the myth were often countered by seemingly respectable reaffirmations of the myth at the highest levels of public discourse. Much has been made of John F. Kennedy’s conscious employment of the western myth in his “New Frontier” speech, and there are obvious links between this mode of thought and the aggressive predictions of lunar landings that Kennedy advanced (correctly) for the late 1960s (Figure 5). Throughout that decade, popular television programs like Star Trek continued to celebrate the space cowboy on Kennedy’s terms. As a writer for The New York Times noted on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the program, Star Trek appealed to something inherently mythical and western in viewers: “Kirk struts about, the rough and ready captain, slightly paunchy, distained from countless cowboys and war-movie heroes; [b]eside him is his strange alien sidekick, Spock, a sort of futuristic Tonto,” while “Dr. McCoy, or ‘Bones,’ a cross between Doc Holliday and a chuck-wagon cook, slurs his words slightly as he finds yet another way to insult Spock” (Gorman 1, 29). And Gene Roddenberry, the producer of the series and a former pilot himself, described the original design of the series as a kind of “Wagon Train to the Stars” (Gunn 456). Many of the episodes deal with thinly veiled Indian/cowboy conflicts between the Terrans and the Klingons and their allies, the Romulans, and few stray far from the ruling imperatives of the T.V. western format.10

Perhaps the most significant modern science-fiction adaptation of the western theme was the “Star Wars” trilogy, the largest grossing movie series of all time, and a clear indicator of the continued popularity of the space cowboy theme. “I wanted to make a space fantasy that was more in the genre of Edgar Rice Burroughs,” producer John Lucas acknowledged of his futuristic space movies (Brosnan 262). In the first installment of the trilogy, Luke Skywalker, the modern western cowboy, discovers his frontier desert home destroyed and his relatives massacred in an alien/Indian raid. Vowing to avenge these losses, Luke adopts the eternal code of the Jedi Knights, pilots who, like the lone white-hatted gunmen of the Old West, operate according to a universal “Force” which protects them against Evil. Luke hooks up with two other stock characters from western mythology (hired gun, Han Solo and his Tonto sidekick, the Wookie), in a saloon scene that features bizarre alien figures acting out a Wisterian drama of manly intimidation and death. The popularity of such episodes in the Star Wars trilogy indicated the continued viability of the frontier myth, and not merely at the level of cinematic culture.

An important direct application of Lucas’s westernized space mythologies came in 1982, when ex-movie acting gunfighter, Ronald Reagan, employed them in the service of national defense policy. Proclaiming that the Soviet Union was the “Evil Empire,” Reagan dubbed his strategic defense plan, “Star Wars,” and asked Americans to support him in a multi-billion dollar venture to disarm the Red Soviets of their stronghold on space (Reagan 442-48). Reagan’s frontier attitudes were sometimes lampooned by members of the press, who pictured him in various gunslinging attitudes, and, in one instance, likened him to Slim Pickens in Dr. Strangelove, now riding an MX missile cowboy-style into space (Figure 6).11 But for every criticism of this application of mythic construct to the language of public discourse, there were those who supported and expanded the logic. In numerous symposia on business opportunities in space, entrepreneurs echoed the vocabulary of 19th-century frontier capitalism. Economist Del Marth noted in an article in Nation’s Business revealingly entitled “Have Rocket, Will Rent,” that business people were “lining up with new rocketry and boxes of experiments, eager to cross the
"They Went Thataway"

Fig. 5. "They Went Thataway"—from Straight Herblock (Simon & Schuster, 1964). Reprinted with permission from The Washington Post.
latest frontier" (32), while ex-astronaut "Deke" Slayton reported on the success of his Texas company in marketing space for research projects on a private rocket, the Conestoga I (Wilford 32).

In the minds of some critics, however, the ease with which Americans continued to converse in the iconology of space westerns belied the fact that, as an operative mythic construct, it has lost much of its connection to reality. Many science fiction writers, for instance, persisted in their questioning of the prevailing myth and its potentially dangerous applications in the public policy arena. In this context, opponents of the "new frontier" ideology drew extensively on the counterlanguage of 19th-century expansion, making direct analogies between the destruction of the Old West and the exploitative nature of space exploration. In Mack Reynolds' short story "Down the River," for instance, Earthlings are visited by powerful Aliens, whose agent informs them that their fate as human beings will be determined by the whims of alien leader Graff Belde Kelden Forty-eight L. When the Earthlings protest against this arbitrary rule, the alien spokesperson points with irony to the self-reflexive qualities of frontier ideologies which have come back to haunt them. "Is it not true that in eighteen-hundred-thirty the United States bought approximately one million square miles of its present territory from the French Emperor Napoleon for fifteen million dollars?" the alien spokesperson asks. "I believe it is called the Louisiana Purchase. I also believe that at that time the Louisiana Territory was inhabited almost exclusively by Amerindian tribes. Had these people ever heard of Napoleon or the United States? What happened to these people when they tried to defend their homes against the encroaching white man?" (136). Adopting the stoic Indian attitude of defiance, the Earthlings cry: "We'll fight! Better death than slavery! We'll unite for all-out defense against the aliens!" (137). But resistance is hopeless. There only defense seems to be in assimilating to the superior culture, and even this is unlikely because of traditional alien prejudices
about mixing with certain races. Consciously parodying white American attitudes toward Indian assimilation, the alien notes with ironic inversion:

"I might say that I consider myself completely without prejudice. It means nothing to me if a person has a green skin, a yellow one or is white, brown, black or red. Some of my best friends are unfortunately colored. However—well, don't you have any races on this planet with a green complexion? The Graff...is known to be extremely prejudiced against races of different colors. If you had some green representatives to meet him'—The president stared at him dumbly. The Graff was distressed. "You mean that you have no races at all on earth of green complexion? Or, at very least, blue?" (138)

Other science fiction writers have focused on the disturbing ecological implications of the prevailing frontier myth. Robert Silverberg's short story "Sundance" features a space-traveling anthropologist-biologist, "Tom Two Rivers," who is engaged in a "corrective" program to destroy cosmic buffaloes, known as "Eaters," as a precursor to the colonization of a foreign planet by Earthlings. A descendant of American Indians, Two Ribbons begins to regret his involvement in the genocidal operations of his "colonization team" and to admire the intelligent, ritualized behaviors of the buffalo. Although he has had a "personality reconstruct" (243-444), a form of memory-editing designed to prevent reflections on the past from incapacitating team members from their work, he gradually makes the metaphoric equivalence between the fate of his own people on Earth and that of these hunted creatures. Dancing with the buffaloes, he feels an ancient power awakening in him: "I summon the skills my ancestors forgot. I feel the power flowing in me...I am their brother, their redskinned tribesman, he who dances with them" (239). Stripping away the layers of myth that have blinded him to the exploitative nature of the "corrective" program they are undertaking, Tom tells his fellow exterminators that they have failed to understand the rich "tribal structure" of the Eaters and that they are recapitulating the mistakes of American frontiersmen: "We never learn a thing, do we? We export all our horrors to the stars.... Wipe out everyone who's in the way, and then come out here and do the same damned murderous thing" (242). Some try to convince Tom that his feelings are all part of a massive personality reconstruct that he has undergone to reconcile him to the displacement of his people, but Two Ribbons knows better. Far from believing that the expedition is part of some contrived therapy "designed to reconcile an embittered aborigine to the white man's conquest" (245), Tom recognizes that he alone has penetrated the myth to reveal the exploitative fibers at its core.

In these and other science-fiction works, we find expressions of the need on the part of writers to suggest alternatives to the trend of alien-hating, which is itself but an extension of the Indian-hating mode. What is especially fascinating about such literature, however, is that these discussions take place on a completely hypothetical level, making the field for debate over the meaning of alien-hating far more rich and expansive than even 19th-century dialogues on the place of the Indian in American culture. Arguments over the "likeability" of imaginary extraterrestrial life-forms, for instance, reveal the power of myth as it operates at all levels of American culture. Aliens in movies like Alien are clearly mysterious, unsavory, salivating creatures bent on human destruction and offering no opportunity for friendship. The metaphoric equivalent of the "savage" Indian as conceived by European writers of the 15th and 16th centuries, such extraterrestrials reflect the gothic fascination of their creators for the terrifying and morose as well as the sublime fear of their audiences for unknown "others." The friendly and lovable alien in E.T. The Extraterrestrial however, invites sympathetic responses and even encourages a self-indicting examination of the incarceration and extermination at the heart of government policies toward to space beings. The clash between alien and human cultures in Spielberg's film is responsible for much of the comedic effect of the movie, but below the surface of such exchanges is a perceptible strain of victimization with obvious parallels to the condition of reservation Indians in the West. All the "extra-terrestrial" wants, after all, is to go home. The children seem intuitively to understand this, but the adults appear as either "uptight parents" who fear for their children's lives or uniformed scientists who descend on the alien/Indian in modern-day cavalry raids designed to "study" and ultimately "exterminate" the creature. Along the rugged suburban streets of California's crabgrass frontier, patrol cardriving "cowboys" chase bicycle-pedaling "Indians" into the forest, where the alien ultimately makes his "hair-raising" escape, but not before permanent damage has been done to planetary relations. This shameful treatment of E.T. reveals the culture's inner anxieties about would-be encounters with alien "others"—anxieties with deep, psychological roots in the metaphysics of Indian-hating on the western frontier.
From the point of view of the evolution of myth, such treatments suggest that even at the most imaginary levels of mythic discourse, profound doubts exist about the applicability of frontier mentalities to cultural conditions. When myths begin to betray a culture in this way, when they no longer serve constructively in the shaping of beneficial cultural self-images, they threaten to bind a people too tightly to highly conventional, form-bound ideologies bearing little relationship to present realities. In his science fiction novel, *The Einstein Intersection*, Samuel Delany considers the dangers associated with the adoption of hollow but still active myths. The novel deals with an alien population that has taken over the earth, adopting mythic personae humans have left behind in their hurry to escape. Acting out scenes in accordance with the particular mythic personality each has assumed, Delany’s characters participate in an allegorical struggle for the establishment of a dominant universal myth by which all life on Earth might be organized. Revealingly, the myth of the western frontier proves inadequate to the task. It is represented by an alien gunslinger named Kid Death, a young, gruesome, Billy the Kid sort of character, who manipulates other characters according to the logic of the western, which he describes as “an art-form the Old Race, the humans, had before we came” (89). Wearing the stereotypic “black and silver hat” and carrying “two ancient guns hung holstered at his hip, with milky handles glimmering,” he asserts his authority by indiscriminately killing aliens in other mythic guises (96). Because he is the omnipresent “bad guy,” and a necessary part of the mythic formula, he knows he cannot be eliminated. But he also cannot enjoy the knowledge of why he acts the way he does either; or to use Delany’s terms, he kills only for the sake of killing without fulfilling any higher cultural significance. Doomed to play a mythic role without purpose or final resolution, Kid Death becomes a tragic and hollow reminder of the indiscriminate nature of the western myth. His inability to distinguish between myth and reality for the purposes of altering his situation makes him a symbolic representation of an entire culture in Delany’s estimation.

With the work of Samuel Delany we come full circle in our understanding of the life-cycle of the frontier myth in popular culture. Born of a need to rationalize rapid expansion into unknown territories and to obscure the exploitation of native inhabitants of those regions, the frontier myth grew to maturity in the period prior to 1890 when the physical pre-

conditions for its existence were still in evidence. By the early 20th-century, the myth proved its resiliency by modifying its metaphoric apparatus to the conditions of outer space, although such adaptations to the high frontier carried with them visible costs in terms of the plausibility and reliability of mythic content. Some continued to carve their cultural heroes out of the old cowboy and Indian stock, while others persisted in efforts to employ national development according to the narrative structures of the dime-novel western. Some even directed public policy in accordance with the language of frontier mythology. But increasingly, science fiction writers and others have pointed to the blinding and anachronistic quality of the frontier myth, citing its long history of Indian-hating and ecological damage as grounds for abandonment. If, in response to Leslie Fielder’s introductory speculations, “stern and imperturbable” Martians do appear someday or, in lieu of that, mythmakers continue to make us believe they can, then the myth of the Old West may persist a while longer. But clinging tenaciously to outdated frontier mythologies may be doing us damage to the extent that it prevents us from considering new mythologies that will serve our culture better; ones that reverse exploitation and racism while prescribing more realistic avenues for public action. Ironically, however, space may still provide us with such new cultural paradigms. “When you see the earth from the moon, you don’t see any divisions there of nations or states,” writes Joseph Campbell. “This might be the symbol for the new mythology to come” (32). If so, then it may simply prove to be an ironic inversion of the old mythology—the dark, unvoiced Indian side of the frontier myth—and tales of outer space may come to tell us more about our lives here on Earth than in the galaxy beyond.

Notes

1. For more on captivity narratives and their relation to frontier mythologies, see Richard Slotkin’s comprehensive trilogy: *Regeneration Through Violence, The Fatal Environment*, and *Gunfighter Nation.*

2. For more on these variations, see Tom Slate, “Edgar Rice Burroughs and the Heroic Epic.”

3. For more on “race” in Burroughs’s work, see Thomas D. Clareson, “Lost Lands, Lost Races: A Pagan Princess of Their Own.” On the specific relationship between “red men” and Martians, see Benjamin S. Lawson, “The Time and Place of Edgar Rice Burroughs’s Early Martian Trilogy.”
Other works in the John Carter series include The Gods of Mars (1918); The Warlord of Mars (1919); Thuvia, Maid of Mars (1920); The Chessmen of Mars (1922); The Master Mind of Mars (1923); A Fighting Man of Mars (1931); Swords of Mars (1936); Synthetic Men of Mars (1940); Llana of Gathol (1948); and John Carter of Mars (1964).

The American prototype for satirical discussions of miscegenation was James Fenimore Cooper's The Last of the Mohicans. For carryovers from Cooper to the work of Burroughs, see Brian Aldiss, "From Barsoom to beyond the Borderlands: Swords, Sorceries and Zitidars," and Richard A. Lupoff, Edgar Rice Burroughs: Master of Adventure.

For more on Christian iconography in Burroughs's A Princess of Mars, see Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation, 195-211.

See also, Burroughs. Apache Devil. For more on this transition from the Martian novels to western sagas, see Robert E. Morsberger, "Edgar Rice Burroughs's Apache Epic."

For more on the rejection of the "mythic west" by westerners, see Gerald Nash, Creating the West: Historical Interpretations, 1890-1900, 197-258. On the demystification of the western hero, see John G. Cawelti, The Six-Gun Mystique.

For more on Japanese and Indian analogies, see J.L. Anderson, "Japanese Swordfighters and American Gunfighters."

In particular, the Star Trek episode: "Spectre of the Gun," in which the crew of the Enterprise return to the Old West of the late 19th century. See also various Star Trek novelizations with western themes, especially Brian Daley's Han Solo and the Lost Legacy. See also "Star Trek" in The New Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, 456.

See, for example, Sidney Blumenthal, "Spacecraft as Spacecraft," and Michael P. Rogin, Ronald Reagan, The Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology.

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