

# Understanding American Historical Change through Cultural Traditions, Physical Environment, & Literature: A Comparative Reflection in Global Community

Imelda S. Lolowang\*

English Education Department, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Manado, Tondano, Indonesia

\*Corresponding Author

Email: [imeldalolowang@unima.ac.id](mailto:imeldalolowang@unima.ac.id)

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## Abstract

This article embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the intricate interplay between cultural traditions, the physical landscape, and the realm of poetry or literature, particularly in their capacity as architects of public myths within societal consciousness. It endeavors to serve as a nuanced comparative reflection, offering valuable insights to English language and literature students. Leveraging the rich historical and cultural tapestry of America, it seeks to illuminate the multifaceted contexts underlying language and literature studies amidst the dynamic trends and formidable challenges of contemporary global society, where both tangible and virtual boundaries are increasingly contested. Rooted in an understanding spanning from the seventeenth century to the twentieth century, the author meticulously selects a myriad of historical records and literary masterpieces, each implicitly or explicitly portraying diverse facets of environmental dynamics and the notion of frontier. These meticulously curated depictions and conceptual frameworks from various sources constitute the cornerstone of the author's analytical approach, elucidating the intricate interconnectedness between American cultural ethos and its surrounding ecological milieu.

**Keywords:** Cultural traditions; Environment; Frontier; Literature

## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between cultural traditions and the physical environment is like the love and hate relationship between a farmer and the land (Runtu et al., 2022; Onthoni et al., 2022; Rorintulus et al., 2022; Talumepa et al., 2022; Keles et al., 2022). On one hand one depends on the land for his or her life, on the other hand, he or she has to toil to get something good from the land. Indeed, God cursed Adam, due to disobedience, to toil his life to provide his own food. Therefore, with Eve who was consequently cursed of having labor pain, which might cost her life, apparently, humans would never be comfortable with such bad luck. This myth of man's relationship with the land, the source of problem and conflict all over the world, made the topic of land, its settlement and resettlement, seem like a manly duty for the survival of mankind, especially when connected to the always-bigger number of male migrants in American frontier and settlement. When we think about the impact of the male migrant majority in the emergence of homosexual life in one colony it seems like the curse to man leads him from one problem to another.

As land becomes scarce, either laziness or greed take part, and family institutions receive the greatest impact of the whole homeland economic problem, since land is food and freedom. So, the problem of man brings consequences on land, as the symbol of living or life itself, which in turn affects them forever as long as they live, as the desire to master and to be free from the land tempts them until they have to go back to dust.

The new trends and challenges caused by the changes or dynamics in a society may cause misunderstanding, even conflicts (Bataha et al., 2021; Komanaung et al., 2021; Lolowang, 2023; Potu et al., 2021; Hohary et al., 2021; Dengah et al., 2021; Hulalata et al., 2023; Kesek et al., 2021). In responding to the social and cultural dynamics, we need to learn and compare our own condition or situation to the previous experiences and studies as examples for our own experiences. In studying the English language and literature particularly, we could boost our knowledge mastery by understanding the cultural, environmental, and literary contexts as well as gaining insights for our own life experiences. What we learn from a foreign context may not be fully similar to our own life context. However, we can take examples, lessons, and understanding from the process, dynamics, and changes that have previously happened in this chosen context.

## **Method**

Many American Studies scholars see the relationship between cultural traditions and the physical environment as central to understanding American historical change. Many of these historians have also depicted this fundamental interaction between culture and environment in terms of the movement from various “frontiers” to “regions” over time and across space. With this environmental vision of American history in mind, the writer explores how images and concepts of “environment,” “frontier,” and “region” have been used by a select group of scholars as the basic approach in their books.

In relation to literature, the writer takes from Jane Tompkins (1985) who states that “American literature ... affects the way people understand their lives and hence becomes responsible”. It can be seen that the cultural traditions and the physical environment are further restated and comprehended through the works of literature, which may function as the makers of public myths through different generations. And, literature that functions as the reflection of human life and experiences, it also records human thoughts and feelings about their life condition.

The writer is going to see the relationship between the cultural traditions, physical environment as well as literary works that help form an understanding about American historical change. From this suggested reflection, readers are expected to gain understanding or insight about the contexts in the topics in English language and literature learning, as well as gaining a comparative understanding of the current trends and challenges in learning and living the era of global, or regional community that may share the similar dynamics.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Frontier Myth***

According to Richard Slotkin in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, the Myth of the Frontier is arguably the longest-lived of American myths, with origins in the colonial period and a powerful continuing presence in contemporary culture. It is an extremely important and persistent as one of the operative ideological systems that forms American culture. Its ideological underpinnings are those same “laws” of capitalist competition, of supply and demand, of Social Darwinian “survival of the fittest” and of “Manifest Destiny”. The frontier was a material condition of life that shaped the behavior and the ideas of colonists and pioneers (1998:15).

The initial frontier era of the colonial America in the seventeenth century began with the coming of the English migrants and later, others, to the east coast of North America, from generation to generation like the continuous waves of the Atlantic Ocean. Frontier as American culture interacts with environment to set foot on the settlement of the region. The vastness of the American land becomes one of the important factors that keep the westward movement happen as the promotional image of the land of opportunity and freedom allured the people. The culture of the frontier, in this case, the people who migrate then interact with the environment both nature and indigenous or local people, to settle in a region. Sometimes this process happens repeatedly from one frontier to another, from one region to the next depending on the relationship between the people and the nature.

Allured by the Spanish riches, the passion to save the Indians from the false religion, and the need to save the English people from wants, a colony was planted to the north of Roanoke in the Chesapeake region (Morgan 46). Plans succeeded and failed, and the colony had to use the image of the dreamland to attract more people as investors, if they were rich, and as servants, if poor. Far from the dream, the reality of being a bondservant in America might end up with misery of plague earlier or with white slavery later. When the frontier people were settling down in the region, they had to face challenges from the efforts of toiling on the land and encountering the indigenous people. With the spirit of a conqueror, some of the settlers were tempted to show off their superiority to the Indians in the sensitive relationships they had been building and throwing down whenever they needed to (Morgan 73). Robert Frost in his poem “The Gift Outright”, recited in Kennedy’s presidential inauguration, “invoked the mythology of savage war to symbolize the processes that had created our [American] nationality” (Slotkin 656). Quoting from the poem:

Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,  
Possessed by what we now no more possessed.  
.....  
Such as we were we gave ourselves outright  
(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)  
To the land vaguely realizing westward, (6-14)

Slotkin is convinced that the American land became theirs when they had already given themselves to it even through war and death and “since the westward movement is the only historical event referred to in the poem, ... it refers

primarily to the European settlers who regenerated their identities and generated their nation by violently dispossessing the Native Americans—who are never mentioned in the poem” (656). However, in Frost’s other poem “America Is Hard to See” (1962), Frost reminds about the original promise of the Frontier Myth and of American history is to “provide the basis for an exceptional future, a new departure from the fatal limitations of human nature and European society” (657). Kindness, as suggested by the poem, is not a charity for the unprivileged, but an essential part of kinship among mortal men:

And so put off the weary day  
When we would have to put our mind  
On how to crowd but still be kind. (40-42).

### ***Slavery and Racism***

The other important cultural system established in the so-called free world, according to Edmund S. Morgan in *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*, was slavery and racism. The cost of settlement in the new colonial region was expensive and some white people had been succeeding in gaining their freedom, which later caused demands in the labor market. As this situation met the affordable price and availability of black slaves in the eighteenth century, intersecting with some laziness of white wage earners, the black slavery was justified as a solution for the planters (1975: 305). Inevitably, the next big thing to emerge from the system was racism together with the paradox in the definition of the colonial belief system in freedom, which emerged from the witnessing and experiencing of the opposite of freedom. In the region of abundance in the promised land of freedom, emerged cultural paradoxes, as expectation could not meet reality as soon as they were conceived.

As synthesized by Jane Tompkins in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (1985), Harriet Beecher Stowe, through her powerfully sentimental novel of the 19th Century *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, convinces that laws or the formation of political pressure groups would not be able to abolish slavery. “For if slavery were to be abolished by these means, the moral conditions that produced slavery in the first place would continue in force” (133). Contrary to Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on Virginia [Negro Slavery]* (1784) stating that “for in a warm climate, no man will labor for himself who can make another labor for him” (qtd, in Foerster and Falk 147), it seems like slavery is an endless battle between the practical and the moral realms.

### ***The Westward Movement and Nomadicity***

For the case of the middle country, the nature of the land reflects the interaction between its culture and environment. The deceptive land with shallow root system was a false image of easy access to settlement and prosperity. The free-roaming Indians in the winter were not the sign of freedom that can be grasped from the land, but a sign of difficult struggle to earn resources. Suiting the shallow provision of the land are the nomadic Plains Indian lives (Elliott West 2000:36). The nature of European intrusion to the land had also been ‘nomadic’ and repetitive.

Seemingly, the nomadic culture of the natives of America, who were always considered as racially inferior, more or less, has infused the blood of European Americans from time to time. Frontier tradition has always been the spirit of the people from colonial era to the current time. The vast and abundant playground of men, however, has its costs to enter.

The repeated nomadicity has displaced the people in new, unknown, threatening, lonely places. Isolated from family and friends far away in the East, the westward movers had to live by longing and loneliness in a new region hard for them to tame. In a cowboy ballad “O Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie” (Foerster and Falk 675) expresses the cowboy’s plea, his misfortune and his grave on a lonely prairie:

“O bury me not on the lone prairie  
Where the wild coyotes will howl o’er me,  
In a narrow grave just six by three,  
.....  
“In fancy I listen to the well known words  
Of the free, wild winds and the song of the birds;  
I think of home and the cottage in the bower  
And the scenes I loved in my childhood’s hour. (9-16)

The intensity of Euro-American culture in the westward movement with horse as its movement and speed symbol has taken part in the extinction of the Indian culture, the symbol of wild environment of the west. Probably, the term wild, wild West itself has been serving as a good metaphor. The wild’s here may seem to represent the nature, the Indians and the land, and the Euro-Americans. As horses gave the natives a life-changing experience of speed and freedom, they also changed the Indians’ status as free people to the ones desperately depending on the agricultural technology the white people had, due to the high-consumption of grass of the new ‘vehicles’ in prairie land. The coming of the horses along with the planting of Euro-American agriculture that cost the land and resources turned the Indians into theft and violence, and the Euro-Americans into opportunism.

The different nature of the two cultures clashed due to different ways of settlement with unparalleled purpose and motivation. The Euro-Americans wanted prosperity and settlement, misinterpreting the image and promise of abundance they saw in promotional literature not realizing that the measure of the provisional capability of the land is in the tight times not the opposite. The Indians, suited the environment for centuries, or probably stuck there in isolation from new ways and civilization, wanted to keep their freedom to roam from one area to the next one. As living in the prairie needed struggle, inevitable conflicts and wars with the native environment was necessary. However, this typical cultural interaction created a ‘middle culture’; the intermarriage between the whites and the Indians to profit and protect the economic and the interest of the whites. As swift as a nomadic season may end, this middle ground tradition as mode of settlement did not have a future as soon as more whites occupied the land and labeled the bi-racial people with stigmatizing terms (West 80).

The stable settlement of the whites began to stabilize with the initial event of Colorado Gold Rush in 1859 and the advent of the railroads. As the Indians lose

grounds, literally and metaphorically, thanks to the soldiers with special extinction mission for the Indians, the middle country of the young Republic was built to be the main connecting route between East and West, between Europe and Asia (West 238). Metaphorically, the meeting process between Asia and Europe cost the extinction of the old brother whose mobility unparalleled to the international mobility and speed of the two others.

As the American colonies became more stable, the people settled down and established their culture in the region. Some of the cultural systems that emerged from the typical regional condition were the emergence, or rather the creation of losers and slaves. Amid the abundance of land, there were only few people who had their freedom. Most of the settlers were servants who had to work their way out of servant hood in years and strict, sometimes inhuman rules, as the product of imported capitalism and monopoly in the new world. It was the old world's culture reestablished in the new one all over again.

As towns grew together with more ranching and farming, the Euro-American culture totally uncontested, replacing, if not dominating, the native culture. The free-roamers still had to roam the land, this time not out of freedom, but more of threat and survival. The white stable settlement of culture and frontiership kept the native culture as they were: nomadic. However, this nomadicity has also been a ritual of the dominant culture, picked up along the way, infused to their blood as they sucked the Indian blood and still possess the people out of desperation or just dissatisfaction.

When economics standard becomes the main reason or motivation for social and cultural interaction, even the race and heritage of one group cannot save them from discrimination (James N. Gregory). Expelled from the Dust Bowl by around 1930s, the strike back of the prairie against and greedy exploitation in the land, the Okies were not welcome by their own brothers in California for their label of poverty. The plain and simple life of the folks combined with poverty on the face turned them to be an alien race by most Californians. The pictures of these poor folks on the media were source of disgust to the Californians. They were recognized as losers and trouble-makers instead of brothers and sisters. Alienated by this attitude, however, the Okies were encouraged to preserve their regional culture and adapt themselves to the new place that gave California its Okie subculture (West 139). Comfortable with farming, many chose to do agricultural works while keeping their language, religion, and later, arts. Faithful to the soil and humble, even after being expelled by the dust, the Okies were proud of their identity and felt united with each other that shared the common misery.

Moving westward mostly not by choice, the Okies hardly gained any pedestal to stand on their new frontier, if the term fits. Transient camps became their homes until works brought them out of there. These 'instant' frontiersmen and women's intense suffering and relatively swift frontiership did not want to waste much time to settle down in California. However, their presence in the West proved that the more civilized California, some of them, was still a wild west for the Okies that they needed still to tame it not with fighting but with patient endurance of the social stigma and the competitive nature of the capitalist state.

Thanks to the rescuing policies of the civilized side of California, the Okies were saved by aid and job channeling. Later, the Okies could even move up from the dust of life by an overall shift in the occupational structure, while racial prejudice

and language barriers channeled the growing Hispanic population into the fields, White Southwesterners filled the new nonfarm jobs. Occupational changes and increasing number of working wives helped to raise the living standard in the forties. It was a great remarkable catch-up period for the Southwesterners.

The success of the Okies' frontier life helped established their subculture through religion and arts like music. However, the great thing with them was that their kind of settlement and resettlement did not just preserve their culture to themselves, but turned it into influencing commodity of arts and religion through country music popularity and Evangelical Protestantism affiliation (West 191).

### ***The Frontier in Mind***

The terms frontier and regions are also applicable to abstract matters like human mind and family, when all of the frontier borders have been reached or tamed. As America developed the new expansion of movie industry, the regions of human mind and family life were in danger. The power of the movie medium could bring about a secular conversion among the masses as it penetrated the subconscious with its silent message (Lary May 1983: 53). As some 'natives', or more exactly the consumers, tried to reject this kind of moral value expansion and conquer lost the battle due to lack of skill in power integration among the plural society, the charm of the movie industry supported by capitalism took over the region with its subtle shift in plot that brought about different reaction and attitude in the audience. First the audience laughed at the characters who failed in meeting the Victorian standards, now they laughed at the Victorian standard itself (May 100).

For the establishment of the industry, the movie people came with an idea to keep the audience come to the theaters. For this purpose, they built beautiful theaters and used consumption allure as keys to the Hollywood image. Another successful way of penetrating the family with the movies was to study the family values and daily problems, and make stories representing their daily challenges, identifying with their group. This is a kind of cultural adaptation to keep the family tamed and go to the theaters. The movies and the movie-makers of Los Angeles are, as stated by Ogden Nash in "Don't Shoot Los Angeles", the compass of the people:

Is it true what they say about Los Angeles, that Los Angeles  
is erratic,  
That in the sweet national symphony of common sense Los  
Angeles is static?

.....  
Many people blame the movies and the movie-makers for Los  
Angeles' emotional rumpus,  
But they are mistaken; it is the compass. (1-6) (249)

The movies and their makers have turned into a prosperous, trend-setting industries, that immortalizing by projecting and reflecting on their silver screen, the American experiences. The consumption allure of the movies served like the allure of the advertisements of mass production to the products. Occupying human mind, touching human needs, providing information and answers to questions, creating necessity, are examples of the techniques of cultural expansion of the corporate

world to the people's private spheres. The mind and the dream of Americans are the new regions and the ads as modernity apostle. As the ad-men found that human mind and emotion are their frontier to conquer, they developed human-interest approaches and techniques and content to persuade the buyers (Roland Marchand 1986:9-10). They study buying motive, personal touch or representation to identify with and to keep the audience in focus.

As products boom, there is a demand of distributing the items to as many people as possible while assessing the special segment in the market place. The message of the advertisements is the reflection of people's reality or part reality. As ads identify and penetrate the human mind, it convinces the perception with old and new concepts with buying as the final mission. The system of belief of the ads penetrates the man's belief system and tried to keep it obedient to consume. As Marchand takes from an anonymous poem "The Advertising Man" in *Printers' Ink*:

Glorifying pink chemises, eulogizing smelly cheeses,  
Deifying rubber tires, sanctifying plumbers' pliers,  
Accolading rubber panties, serenading flappers' scanties,  
.....  
Some call us the new town criers,  
Others call us cock-eyed liars! (1-6) (50)

It must be admitted that there are always two sides of a coin of progress. On one hand, advertising becomes a heavy-traffic bridge for industry and commerce. On the other hand, it might be a misleading lane for the consumers, who may be distracted to end up in a dead end of excessive consumption and credit card debts.

As ads are distributed nationally, it is a completely new expansion of culture with people's mind and dream as the new region to settle down. However, when American business investment expands internationally, the cultural expansion to the foreign countries is inevitable and tensions and conflicts follow. It is just another frontier to tame, emotionally or rationally. The images of either movies or product ads are symbols of American dream for sale.

Along with the abstract frontier, the physical or regional frontier for America is still in progress in a slight different mode of expansion. The image of Buffalo Bill Cody the cowboy as a stage epoch was seen as a potential force for "universal peace". It is believed that there is a historical role of violence; as civilization requires peace and as a means of peace is war (Slotkin 80). According to Slotkin," this thesis of historical argument is essentially the same as Roosevelt's advocacy of American imperialism by armed force on the "barbarian race". For Roosevelt, the choice of man of violence and conquest as the representative frontiersmen was appropriate to the kind of ideology he wished to justify. For him, significant action occurs at the cutting edge of expansion, where representatives of different races contend for mastery" (Slotkin 35).

With the image of cowboy like the heroic Buffalo Bill as the symbol of frontier, there seems to be a racial motivation in the significance of expansion. However, the present expansion to foreign countries for the reason of peace, justice, and civilization is the indication that the spirit of frontier is still kept alive in the American blood, and would always be there.



## CONCLUSION

The concepts of “environment”, “frontier”, and “region” are significant in understanding the American history from time to time because movement and expansion are the nature of Americans as seen in the American cultural traditions, physical environment, and literature. Although it cannot be denied that, sometimes even the purest modern motive of expansion may be stained by certain interests and probably for some other modes of study, it would be hard to see the direct interaction between the people and the physical environment; however, it can be concluded that this basic approach has factually depicted the fundamental interaction between culture and environment in terms of the movement from various “frontiers” to “regions” over time and across space, and even, probably, across some virtual space in the digital era.

From this study, the writer can obtain some important points as examples of the dynamics and public myths of a society. Based on these findings, the writer could understand and see some impacts when a relationship among cultural traditions, the physical environment, and literary works as undeniably the reflection and voice of human thoughts, all come into being. From this study, the writer can pinpoint some lessons we can observe and anticipate when changes happen in a social experience. When people move from place to place, for the sake of better life, there will be conflicts and challenges. They may claim and reclaim the land, property, or even some web space, as well as the opportunities available. There can be a threat on human rights, discrimination and the likes within a society. There can be a displacement of people caused by movements or competition. There can also be physical and psychological expansion in different aspects of life. These impacts are also reflected and recorded in the literary works selected above. They reflect the conflicts, challenges, expectations and realities, even disappointments that emerge in a society when changes, movements, and expansions take place. This study may also give insights and understanding for the English language and literature readers and learners, especially in comprehending about the context as well as the challenges of an ever dynamic society, its language and literary texts.

“This is the end, O Pioneer---  
These final sands  
I watch you sift with meditative hands,  
Measure the cup of conquest.”  
---James Rorty

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