Introduction
Distance: modern transnational frontiers

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Modern frontiers and the case for transnational studies

For the purposes of this collection, frontiers may be defined as unfinished spatial projects. Despite their potential as gateways to wealth and regeneration, borderlands seem to stubbornly escape human mastery. But they do so over long periods of time, and the overall impression is that frontiers eventually close. The essays presented here explore a period commonly referred to as modernity. Modernity means many things, but we could narrow it down to three historically and locally rooted developments: industrialization, nation-state building, and imperialism. In the nineteenth century, with the rise of the world industrial economy, the modern frontier was intellectually recognized. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote about it in 1848 (n.p.): “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.” Modern capitalism goes hand in hand with the making of the nation-state, which is nothing if not a process of frontier making. In Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism (1845) Juan Domingo Sarmiento looked at the vast plains that lay beyond Buenos Aires and concluded, drawing from Johann Gottfried von Herder and James Fenimore Cooper in equal measure, that the Argentinian national character was the product of distance, solitude, and rugged gaucho (cowboy) livelihoods. Fueled by the profits and needs of industry, governments created new networks that reached beyond the nation-state. Imperialism was a long-distance form of border crossing that slowly turned the entire world into a gigantic space of uneven flows. Ideologically, nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialism was justified on the grounds of sheer economic necessity and a moral obligation to civilize the innocent, barbarian hordes. It is worth recalling Rudyard Kipling’s The White Man’s Burden (1899)—“Your new-caught, sullen peoples/Half-devil and half-child”—but for balance’s sake, let us quote from Mochiyi Rokusaburo, a member of the Japanese colonial administration in Taiwan, who in 1902 wrote:

The problem of aboriginal land has yet to arrive at a successful solution. Yet if we do not solve this problem, our countrymen will likely fail to realize their great potential for overseas expansion. Occupying 50 to 60 percent of the
entire islands, the aboriginal lands constitute a treasure trove rich in forest, agricultural, and mining resources. Unfortunately, we have not succeeded in unlocking this treasure trove because ferocious savages block our access to it... it is not a problem that one can hope to resolve by ethical means.

(Rokusaburo quoted in Tierney 2010, 44)

It is useful to think of transnational frontiers as cultural networks that either surpass or ignore national borderlines. The prefix “trans” means “beyond” and “across.” A transnational study should either be located beyond the nation or study movements that occur across lines dividing nations; at the very least, a transnational study must take into account the other side of the border. The second proposition seems straightforward—a transnational study is an international study—but it is not necessarily so. As historian Akira Iriye has explained (2013), transnational history differs from international history in that it brings the richness of context, cultural context, into an equation that traditionally contained only diplomacy and politics. Iriye’s book *Power and Culture* (1981), a study of the Pacific War, identified the cultural turn taking place in academia after the publication of classics-to-be such as Clifford Geertz’s “Thick Description” (1973) and Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). The accent has moved to big frontiers (e.g. imperial frontiers, as in the case of Said’s Orient) and small frontiers (Geertz’s cockfight in Bali being a case in point). A focus on culture as it really is, a shapeless thing that almost never coincides with the limits of an specific country, compels researchers to leave the nation in the background as a unit of analysis.

To be sure, as Jane Rausch writes in Chapter 1 in this volume, “the political significance of international border[s] is a reality not readily dismissed,” a point that is particularly emphasized by Daniel Margolies in Chapter 5. Other contributors to this book make similar observations. Miki Namba shows in Chapter 14 how governments build recreational infrastructures to block the natural porosity of borders. Culture itself has been a site of patriotic identification, akin to language and race, since at least the Romantic period. When combined with nationalism and radical politics, culture is a time bomb whose consequences range from mass deportation (Low, Chapter 15 this volume) to genocide. And, to paraphrase Fischer (Chapter 10 in this volume), a significant part of the frontier’s history happens, i.e. is imagined, in the press and other media aimed at a general public that could not be more out of touch. It seems clear, though, that the tables were turning from the outset. DNA sequencing has sufficiently proven that human history is one of generalized migrations, never confined to the national geo-bodies (Winichakul 1994) concocted by antiquarians and map-makers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Sociologists, from Georg Simmel (1902) to John Urry (2007), and everyone in between, have produced theories that explain how modern societies become deterritorialized—and in doing so, they spill beyond the nation. Modernity offers unprecedented opportunities and obligations to become mobile. People, things, capital, and ideas are on the move. Mobility, in turn, dislocates cultures. Think of the overseas migrant, of the peasant in the city and, in the terrain of fake documentary, of the African tribe thrown off balance by the
chance discovery of a bottle of Coke (*The Gods Must Be Crazy* 1980). Finally, to be beyond the nation implies a certain kind of detachment that seems quintessentially modern: a refusal to be constrained by political borderlines, when traveling internationally for instance, and a refusal to stop consuming commodities regardless of their origin. Commodities essential to sustain middle-class lifestyles (oil, rubber, drugs, foodstuffs, and so on) are often imported from remote regions. Shopping and leisure habits signal a shift from Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” (1991 [1983]) to Chua Beng Huat’s “communities of consumers” (2006), and should be taken into account if the making of modern frontiers is to be fully understood.

At this point we must distinguish transnational practice from transnational theory, even if there is an obvious correspondence between the two. In the introduction to the *Transnational Studies Reader* (2008), Peggy Levitt and Sanjeev Khagram speak of five “intellectual foundations” of this program:

1. **Empirical transnationalism** aims to provide evidence of the transnationalization of modern society. Levitt’s own work with migrants (2001) is an excellent example, but the hunt is on to document the cross-border experience of modernity on a global scale. In some instances the evidence confirms the Westernization of the world. In others, it points toward localization or indigenization. This wealth of data reveals unprecedented cultural processes, but it also supports David Harvey’s statement (2001, 24) that “the contemporary form of globalization is nothing more than yet another round in the capitalist production and reproduction of space. It entails a further diminution in the friction of distance . . . through yet another round in innovation in the technologies of transport and communication.” As Luis Roniger demonstrates in this volume (Chapter 13), history and geography still matter.

2. **Methodological transnationalism** involves the creation of new research methods. The political economy of big frontiers and the affective economies (Ahmed 2004) mediating the study of small frontiers have found ways to interact with each other. Multidisciplinary inquiry is the norm nowadays, although it has been decades in the making. Historians have long been in deep conversation with anthropologists, and anthropologists have long “moved to the city” in order to comprehend the fate of folk cultures. Cultural studies is perhaps the best example of a methodological melting pot designed to capture the complexity of our contemporary, transnationally networked society. On the downside, common themes in frontier research (non-urban spaces, historicism, unchosen livelihoods as opposed to liberally cherry-picked lifestyle choices, and political economy, among others) are underrepresented in the cultural studies literature.

3. **Theoretical transnationalism** is the lasting result of such surveys. A new discourse supported by an army of powerful metaphors has taken hold of academia in the past 30 years or so. In the 1990s, a decade of neoliberal frenzy surrounding the collapse of the USSR and the techno-utopian build up to the dot.com crash, some of the most popular assumptions overlooked the role of...
resistance in the making and functioning of transnational links. In short, the image of the virtual network was too readily extrapolated to socioeconomic structures, at a time of financial and political optimism. A Marxian revival following the 911 attacks and the economic crisis of 2008 has corrected this oversight somewhat. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s *Friction* (2005) and Alison Hulme’s *On the Commodity Trail* (2015) serve as a reminder that neither things nor people flow as easily as virtual information does.

*Philosophical transnationalism* is, in Levitt’s own words (2), a “metaphysical assumption that social worlds and lives are inherently transnational.” Even the most self-contained culture exists on the back of economic and non-economic exchange between peoples that see each other as foreigners. Tribal exogamy and the Kula ring (Malinowski 1922) provide “non-modern” evidence of this. Strangers, as the one that appears in Georg Simmel’s same titled essay of 1902, are the rule and not the exception in virtually all human societies: “He is fixed within a particular spatial group, or within a group whose boundaries are similar to spatial boundaries. But his position in this group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning” (1950 [1902], 402). Strangers are frontier-makers, not only philosophically speaking but in actuality as well.

*Public transnationalism* is the official acknowledgment of modern mobility and the policies that result from it. Public transnationalism encompasses a pro-active education in international brotherhood, shared historical experiences, and mutual interests. There is the UN and the EU after World War II, and more recently LAIA (Latin American Integration Association) and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), in Latin America and Asia respectively, but there have also been less noble efforts toward pan-Europeanism, pan-Americanism, and pan-Asianism, driven largely by imperialist design—the Lebensraum, the Monroe Doctrine, the Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. But again, grand discursive gestures do not convey (if anything, they hide) the complexity of cultural practice at the local and regional levels (see e.g. Ávila-Tàpies, Chapter 4 in this volume).

The “transnational turn” brings to mind Immanuel Kant’s cosmopolitanism—“knowledge of the world... as a citizen of the world”—which the German philosopher understood as something of a moral obligation. On a more materialist level, there are at least two reasons why the nation-state ought to be considered in transnational terms. First, the state apparatus tends to be less effective, less impressive, as it moves away from the city. Frontiers are relatively distant regions, where the policeman and the tax collector are weak by comparison with their metropolitan counterparts (see McClure, Chapter 6, this volume). The importance of isolation in the making and sustaining of frontiers stands out in the work of James C. Scott (2009). For the nation-state, every village is a problem, a problem of distance to be dealt with. Substitute “village” with “colony” and the problem is not one of internal colonialism, but of colonialism as such. In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1992), Scott finds inspiration in George Orwell’s classic 1936 essay
“Shooting an Elephant,” a masterful critique of imperialism and also a healthy reminder of the loneliness of the colonial agent. In the frontier too, nations overlap and transnational contacts occur, but by itself overlap does not produce a frontier. Rather, what does produce it is the tendency of places and people to escape, to a greater or lesser extent, passively or otherwise, the tight administration of the nation-state; hence, the frontiers of modernity may be defined as transnational in principle. Second, as explained above, transnationalism as a process has only intensified with the expansion of the world industrial economy. As the essays in this volume show, transnationalism does not invalidate the nation as a bounded, coherent self, although it makes it more and more difficult, more and more an exercise in territorial bigotry, to call oneself a nationalist. In many ways, transnationalism in the social sciences is a twenty-first-century version of Kant’s cosmopolitanism, located somewhere along the line that separates the totalizing agenda of globalization from the close-up familiarity implied in cultural relativism.

Big frontiers (and everyday life)

Why Asia and Latin America? The editors of this book share a background in Latin American studies and a postdoctoral interest in Asia as a topic of both research and teaching. It was our goal to move not only beyond the nation but also beyond what is vaguely known as Area Studies. There has been ample debate about the validity of Area Studies at a time of all-pervading globalization (e.g. Sidaway 2013). In the chapter that closes this volume (Chapter 16), Pedro Iacobelli brings to light the linkages that exist between the birth of Area Studies and U.S. geopolitics during the Cold War. Argentinian semologist Walter Mignolo (2009, 270) has gone as far as arguing that continents are colonial constructs, and has called for a “decolonization of narrated history and imperial historiographical thought.” This is a compelling point, Saidian in spirit. The essays presented here sufficiently show that all frontiers are shape-shifting spaces, both in theory and in practice. However, continental borders do count. They count by virtue of physical geography. Dozens of countries and hundreds of cultures comprising each area of study offer more than enough material for one scholar to digest in a lifetime—albeit individual research is often limited to one country and/or one extra language. But we want to draw the readers’ attention to the artificial barriers dividing university departments. Latin Americanists and Asianists know precious little of each other’s work, and that represents a tremendous loss to the scholarly community. In the past decade or so, a proliferation of centers devoted to Global and Transnational Studies has begun to break down some of these barriers, but there is much to be done. Transnational Frontiers of Asia and Latin America makes a historico-geographical and anthropological contribution to this now popular trend (Geiger 2008; Readman et al. 2014).

Big frontiers and small frontiers come into play here. On the one hand, there is the vastness of scale. By global standards, and certainly by European standards, Asia and Latin America are enormous. Territorial size translates into an abundance of frontiers. In the strict sense, frontiers are relatively large, seemingly empty
spaces. This statement may be misleading, because the pretended emptiness of the world has always been a convenient excuse for colonialist expansionism. Early twentieth-century political cartoonists often relied on the octopus as a visual metaphor to condemn—and to mock (see Figure I.1)—the slimy yet otherworldly ways in which states, capital, and empires wrapped themselves around the five continents. Distance is also a factor in Frederick Jackson Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1994 [1893]). This paper, first delivered as a speech, is rightly understood as a symbolic articulation of U.S. exceptionalism, but it should be noted that Turner defined the frontier objectively, in terms of low demographic density, highlighting the distinction between crowded Europe and open-spaced America. Throughout modern history, much of the “empty” Latin American subcontinent and large portions of Asia (let alone Africa) have been seen with telescopic, colonizing eyes.

On the other hand, there is everydayness. Colonizers are strangers who make the frontier come to life. They are settlers, soldiers, civil servants, and investors, but also tourists, journalists, explorers, and even conservationists (see below Howard, Chapter 9; MacRae, Chapter 11; and Acciaioli and Sabharwal, Chapter 2). The metaphor of the octopus does not express their real significance, or rather insignificance. Micro-analysis allows for intimate readings of cultural contact as it happens at ground level, beneath the overarching theme of the conqueror vs. the victim. Archival research complicates all attempts at ready-made sentimentalism, and in the field especially the world is a confusing place. Individual memory blends into local mythology, diluting historical facts in a maelstrom of circular times. Furthermore, all material leftovers of past modernizing efforts are indicative of loss and retreat, not of positive progress (Gordillo 2014). Through the microscope, in sum, the frontier has an uncanny air about it—unsettling yet familiar, disturbing yet candid. Take as example a photograph and caption from Lewis Cotlow’s Amazon Head-Hunters (1954, 129). The image shows the explorer and filmmaker, whose professional life was devoted to a sort of spectacular salvage anthropology, sitting next to four native children in Amazonian Ecuador. They are all smoking. The caption reads: “Colorado Indian children liked the author’s cigarettes, but the little girl next to him felt ill.” Everydayness is a disarming experience, and in the face of thick description the researcher often finds himself bereft of moral and metaphorical support.

But, again, frontiers are the product of long-term, wide-ranging processes that transcend the deafening stillness of everyday life. The pattern of frontier expansion in Latin America has been the subject of an interesting debate (Hennessy 1978; Weber and Rausch 1994; Cecil 2012), especially in Brazil, a country that ignored its backlands until the mid-twentieth century, when the federal government was transferred from the old coastal city of São Paulo to the newly-built, high modernist experiment that is Brasília (for a critique, see Berman 1982, and Scott 1999). Speaking of loss and retreat as constitutive features of teleological progress, in 1938, looking at the then still underpopulated hinterland of São Paulo, geographer Preston E. James wondered: “Why has the frontier of agricultural settlement swept over this territory, leaving derelict landscapes, shorn forest cover, with worn-out and eroded soils, but with little permanent settlement attached to

Source: Library of Congress.
the land? Why is Brazil,” Preston concluded (361), “still a land with a hollow frontier?” More generally, hollow frontiers are characterized by boom-and-bust cycles before they finally become depressed and stagnant.

The opposite of a hollow frontier would be a sustainably marginal border zone, which is how frontier ethnohistorian Ma Dazheng (2012, 68) envisions the role of China Proper in its cultural and territorial fringes. But this is policy-making, ideological thinking. In reality, a typical pattern of market and state expansion involves the growth of “nodes of prosperity” amid “waves of ruination” (Gordillo 2014, 126–127). Hollow frontiers are, in short, a feature of modernity. Feverish boomtowns grow “in the middle of nowhere,” thin communication lines are laid down, and nothing is left behind (or along) when the rush comes to an end. The solitary pipelines that traverse Central Asia and even the party islands in the tropical South, where late-night hallucinatory excess turns into a wasteland of broken glass and vomit in the morning—what John Urry (2014) referred to as the offshoring of leisure—provide sensuous proof of the inner workings of hollow frontiers in transnational times.

Populist frontier mythology should not be overlooked, in part because it filters into the academic discourse too. The Turner Thesis created the myth that American democracy and prosperity were one with the frontier. The Hollow Frontier Thesis has gathered empirical evidence to suggest that Latin American borderlands—from Mexico (Redclift 2004) to Chile (Klubock 2014)—are harbingers of poverty and instability. Colonial prejudice and magical realism did the rest. Theodore Roosevelt, who believed that the frontier was indeed an integral part of the American psyche, and therefore supported his country’s post-Wild West maritime adventures, traveled in South America in 1913, and reached the conclusion that the chief obstacles to the industrial exploitation of the tropical plains of the interior were two: mosquitoes and “the revolutionary habit” (Roosevelt 1914, 43). Historically, frontier underdevelopment has been blamed on both natural and cultural causes. In fiction literature, the climate turns the colonizer into a madman of Mr. Kurtz proportions. In government and company reports, such as the Japanese opinion on Taiwan quoted above, the uncooperative native, whether “lazy” or “unruly,” makes any attempt at systematic use of the landscape futile. As Gutarra notes in this volume in relation to the slave-fueled French colonies in the Caribbean, transoceanic distance lends itself to vivid tropes of “difference” that function as a strategy of political, economic, and bodily exclusion.

In the twentieth century the idea was put forward that the world was the Great Frontier (Webb 1952) of European history. The successful tapping of distant regions became central to many academic explanations of European growth after 1500. Marxism turned this notion into a comprehensive critique of international capitalist exploitation. Dependency and world-systems theory (Cardoso and Faletto 1979 [1971]; Wallerstein 1976), still influential despite lacking some key elements such as thick description and native agency, were the result of this effort. Stephen Bunker (1984, 1017) spoke of Amazonian “modes of extraction” in an attempt to avoid Eurocentric accounts for the “ways in which the extraction and export of natural resources affect the subsequent developmental potential” of
“extreme peripheries.” Modes of extraction belong in places where the export of raw materials can sustain an economy with no developed modes of production—remote places, by and large, where the “wilderness” has not yet been domesticated.

Because of their relative isolation, extreme peripheries are potential conduits for extreme violence and repression. Economic demand in the metropolis, no matter how banal, can easily breed a “culture of death” (Taussig 1984) in the frontier. In the world that invented the telegraph and the Internet, news may still arrive late or be ignored at the centers of media production; rumors may not be corroborated and publicized for years. There is a long tradition of atrocities committed in the Great Frontiers of extraction, and in their scale and brutality they seem unreal, “pure” events as opposed to historical events (Lundborg 2012). Outside the parameters of this “space of terror” (again, Taussig 1984), there is the everyday violence that circulates in the socioeconomic margins of capitalism, where longue durée peonage is customary and local government corruption is rife.

Culture and nature, producers and consumers

The notion of wilderness-as-last-frontier is an enduring one. Its appeal is directly related to the history of modern markets, but it also belongs to the world of middle-class dreaming and consumption. Either way, these are loci of desire that continually shape the cultural and economic borders of the world-system. For some, the vanishing frontier has nostalgic overtones, reminiscent of Cooper’s Last of the Mohicans (1826). Amazonian deforestation and the looming death of tribes “never before seen”—but surely on YouTube for everyone to see—are among the mass media’s favorite apocalyptic scenarios, and rightly so. For others, the frontier is open for business, a last-chance or be-the-first-to-get-there type of invitation. Myanmar/Burma, comparatively rich in oil and gas resources, minerals, and timber, has been labeled “Asia’s last frontier,” and “the final frontier in South East Asia.” The sense of urgency is palpable and speaks of a long process of transnationalization. On a broader scale, this is the story of how commodity chains became ubiquitous in contemporary life. Some of the most groundbreaking research themes in modern Asian and Latin American frontiers include precisely long-distance thing-tracking (e.g. Gootenberg 2015; Mizushima et al. 2014) and localized critiques of tropical tourism (Gmelch 2012; Hoefinger 2013) that resonate with what, by now, is a traditional idea: that the frontier is there to be used by someone else.

The polarization of the world between “the West and the Rest” is becoming increasingly problematic, but claims that “core” and “periphery” are no longer viable tenets may be an exaggeration at best, and a concession to those who equate flow with freedom at worst. The world’s frontiers are still shrinking, following a Caspian Sea-type pattern that prevails since 1500 and that took on a new meaning at the onset of modernity. It may be the case that we are living post-natural times, in the sense that “there is no more nature that stands apart from human beings” (Purdy 2015, 3). We should, however, be wary of canceling the culture vs. nature divide altogether. The Amazon Basin, the forests of Burma and Central Africa,
the Arctic Plains, and the colossal Coral Triangle are good examples of endangered primeval regions. While their nature has been altered by millennia of native labor and by two centuries of intensive industrial agency, these and a handful of other places are the last great natural frontiers of planet Earth. From 1800 there have been moments of rupture, stoppage, and acceleration, and yet the progressive loss of nature in the course of modern human history is unquestionable. We have not yet reached an endpoint.

The shift in global power toward multi-polarity will require an equal redistribution of blame and liability. This need is more acute given that contemporary modernity is far more advanced than, say, Cold War modernity. Economic and spatial optimization must be discussed, using critical theory as an interpretive frame. Producers and consumers are getting ever closer to each other and, as result, schizophrenic frontiers—for instance, Peruvian pineapples in Thai supermarkets—are taken-for-granted facts of transnational existence. The BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) appear to be confirming the main points of Francis Fukuyama’s “End of History” prophecy (1992). The meaning of culture (whatever pertains to middle-class leisure) is more or less universally agreed upon. Let us not forget that Osama Bin Laden nurtured not only a burning hatred of the West but also a substantial stash of pornography. Present-day glocalized culture seems therefore less of a double-edged sword and more of a numbing shopping experience. Its highest philosophical expression is perhaps the English-language “pseudo-profound bullshit” (Pennycook et al. 2015) that swamps the social media in the form of supposedly inspirational quotes. In the “civilizing missions” of the twenty-first century, “civilization” is progressively deprived of non-economic ethical moorings—however cynical and murderous, catholic guilt and Victorian propriety did slow down European colonial expansion—and gradually confused with raw commercial profit and wishy-washy social virtues such as entertainment and fun. The global middle class has all the qualities of a drone operator, raping the wilderness in real time, while creating an insurmountable moral distance between killer and target, the pleasures of consumption and the perils of production. And if this is the Asian Century, as it seems to be, then it is sensible to think that Asia will be doing (is already doing) a lot of the drone operator’s work in the deserts, seas, and forests of the world.

* There is a rich literature on Asian historical frontiers, including the writings of Peter Perdue (e.g. 1987; 2005) on China. Great Frontiers of Asian modernity comprise vast swathes of the Chinese mainland (Billé et al. 2012), the Southeast Asian forests and deltas (Tagliacozzo 2005), the thousands of islands scattered between the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Shicun and Hong 2014), the sea frontier itself (Wang 2014), and the expanse between Northern India and Central Asia (e.g. Warikoo 2009). Much of this corresponds to Zomia, an area only recently conceptualized that, precisely because of its multinational vastness, offers all kinds of opportunities for contention (Scott, 2009; Jonsson, 2010; Michaud 2010; Zhidan Duan, Chapter 7 this volume). Zomia covers the rugged hills of northern
Thailand, Myanmar/Burma, and Indochina, the southwestern provinces of China, and for some authors the Himalayas and its western ramifications too, all the way to Afghanistan. Zomia has one distinctive feature: it is hard to reach. For that reason, the region remains not only enticing for speculators, but also embarrassingly ethnic (see Metz, Chapter 12, this volume) in relation to the pulling forces of the nation-state. Zomia, in James Scott’s words (2009, 4), “represents the last great enclosure movement in South East Asia.” It is a modern project of standardization—some would call it cultural annihilation—and, as a historic site of resistance, it is the source of age-old headaches among Asian policy makers.

The phrase “embarrassingly ethnic” seems appropriate here, as it defines a general attitude of the urban middle-classes in these rapidly modernizing countries toward the unclean peasantry and the backward countryside. Above all, the frontier has connotations of poverty. Material poverty in Asia and Latin America is remembered across generations and is also felt in the flesh through the senses—for example, in the sight of tan-skinned street vendors and in the smell of rotting food outside trendy shopping malls (and, inside the malls, in the self-effacing circulation of cleaners from upcountry; see Brody 2006). The nation-state and the capitalist economy are “closing in” in the city too. While this volume deals largely with out-of-the-way spaces—frontiers, both big and small, in the traditional sense—the investigation of transnational contact zones in Asia and Latin America asks for yet another kind of materialist approach: a study of gentrification (along the lines of Smith 1996) and bodily practices that will shed light on the metropolitan interaction between civilization and barbarism. At any rate, when studying frontiers it seems logical to consider the different biographies of those in charge of the narrative. What looks fresh and quaint to Euro-American eyes, without a doubt because Westerners invented the Noble Savage, might appear old and tired to Asian and Latin American observers. British students have no trouble sympathizing with Margaret Mead’s bucolic take on Samoan teenagers (1928), while Thai students will gaze at the PowerPoint slides with quiet skepticism.

At the level of everyday life the frontier offers endless angles for scholars to pursue, but the point remains that Zomia, Amazonia, and all other borderlands of Asia and Latin America are losing ground against the history of transnationalization. The frontier metaphor—the stranger in the wilderness—may well be a subconscious part of the human mind: to be touched from a distance, to be conquered and kept. But actual expansion into the next big empty land is a driving principle of modern life, of complex society, and of civilization. Hence, as Arjun Appadurai put it (2006, 9), “the anxiety of incompleteness.” Geographical anxiety is neither metaphysical nor suspended in time; it is the result of knowing as a matter of fact that the land will be taken.

References


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