Mythologizing the West: Manifest Destiny, the Transcontinental Railroads, and the Afterlife of the Frontier in American Culture

Abstract

In 1890, the United States Census Bureau announced the official closing of the frontier, declaring that there was no longer a significant contiguous space in the country with an average population density of fewer than two inhabitants per square mile. Yet well over a century after its ostensible demise, the frontier continues to lead a vigorous and complex existence on the level of imagination. The frontier has come to signify both virtuous small-scale farming on the plains and the idealized advance of industrial civilization, and this heterogeneous, mythologized image of the frontier has come to undergird America’s understanding of its own identity. The appearance of the transcontinental railroads in the middle of the nineteenth century provides a fruitful moment for examining the creation and operation of frontier mythology: the transcontinentals sparked discussions of how America thought of itself both in terms of its industry and in terms of the frontier, and examining our treatment of that land and the evolving mode of transportation which first made it widely accessible can tell us a great deal about America’s vision of the future. This paper’s analysis of various materials written by politicians, railroad company publicists, and private citizens supporting the construction of the transcontinental railroads reveals ostensibly contradictory commitments to agrarian and industrial visions of the West, and I argue that this tension contributes to America’s contemporary image of the frontier as a space of both small-scale agriculture and nascent but inevitable industrialization. To this day, corporations capitalize both literally and figuratively on the romantic imagery of the frontier to serve commercial ends.