

Gendered Spaces: The Frontier in Rod Jones's *Billy Sunday*

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This paper is drawn from a longer study which focuses on the use of spatial imagery in the representation of masculinities in recent Australian fiction. Travel is a recurrent feature of these recent novels and is, at first, often regarded as a liberation by the characters. However, without the systems which support identity, dislocation proves a threat which the protagonists attempt to compensate for by invoking the authority and structures of their cultural homeland. Spatial imagery not only elucidates the contestation and colonisation of physical space: as a metaphor for the colonisation of cultural, corporeal, cognitive and discursive domains, it is a means of exploring the production and maintenance of masculine identities.

Rod Jones's *Billy Sunday* (1995) explores all of these dimensions through the image of the frontier. Investigating what he calls the 'imagined unconscious' of the frontier theory advanced by the nineteenth-century American historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, Jones makes Turner a protagonist in his novel and the father of the eponymous Billy Sunday. Concentrating on the Turner character, this paper will discuss the frontier as a border of silence and exclusion and the formative role it plays in the production of individual masculinities and national identities. It will briefly consider Turner's frontier theory and Paul Carter's rejection of the frontier. Applying Julia Kristeva's thesis in *Powers of Horror* (1982) to Jones's vision in *Billy Sunday*, I will argue that the abject and abjection provide a paradigm for both the frontier and its history and for a masculinity which, according to Bob Connell, has always been closely connected with the frontier.¹

In *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893), Turner asserts that

American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating the American character. (200)

Jones takes up the notion of 'perennial rebirth' and evolution to create a frontier Eden in *Billy Sunday*. The Wisconsin forests symbolise the pre-lapsarian world, but as the site of the fictional Turner's 'fall from grace' it becomes both a figure for Paradise lost and, contaminated by his guilt, Hell. Judging the frontier theory to be 'not so much an hypothesis as a romantic urge which concealed its own sources and omissions', Jones draws an analogy between his protagonist's attempts to repress the

a settled area the region still partakes of the frontier characteristics' (201).

In *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987), Paul Carter dismisses the concept of the frontier and its application to an Australian context. He rejects it as a cultural mythology of space on the grounds that:

the frontier is usually conceived of as a line, a line continually pushed forward (or back) by heroic frontiersman, the pioneers. Inside the line is culture; beyond it, nature. As the frontier moves, nature is bulldozed into submission. There is no negotiation, simply the imposition of a new regime by force. Culture does not evolve or adapt: it simply replicates itself over an ever-growing territory. The frontier signifies the decisive exclusion of all that is not culturally familiar: and it excludes even when it incorporates it. For the act of incorporation involves the complete silencing and obliteration of whatever it was that made the frontier necessary in the first place. The rhetorical significance of the frontier is that it empties the beyond of any cultural significance even before it is subdued. (158)

Understood as a barrier of exclusion and silence, the frontier is incompatible with the thesis of spatial history. Instead, Carter substitutes the boundary which, he argues, facilitates communication by creating the relationship between here and there in the same way that language constitutes self and other. Carter contends that it is only through the perception and naming of spatial 'otherness' that a place can enter cultural circulation. In essence, the significance of the boundary is that 'it enables the writer to bring the "other" into focus, if only as an enemy, as a perceivable space' and, so, invents the conceptual coordinates which allow a place to be expressed (152). Only then can 'history' begin.

However, if Carter rightly rejects the concept of the frontier in a spatial history of settlement, perhaps it is because it is *not* a figure for the task of bringing a nation into being, but for defining what is lost in the process. In *Billy Sunday*, Jones positions the frontier as the 'prequel' to settlement and speculates on the forces which produced the characteristics of the frontier defined by Carter and which may, after all, be relevant to the Australian context. The dark, silent wilderness beyond the limits of the frontier outpost of Balsam Point lack the boundaries which Carter says allow the traveller to 'locate himself in a landscape' (147). It is to this lack that he attributes the 'spatial nausea' which he identifies in response to the wildness of the bush in E.M. Curr's *Recollections of a Squatter*, a symptom of the men's 'sense of being out of bounds, of being invisible to themselves, though visible (and a prey) to others: in short, a sense of placelessness' (147-8). This sense of being out of bounds and its symptom are indicative of abjection.

Kristeva defines abjection as a border. Beyond it lies the excluded ground of the abject. Unlike the object of desire, the abject is antithetical to meaning and it is banished because it contradicts the identity of individuals and societies. The basic principles of the abject and abjection are summed up in the differentiation between clean and dirty and proper and improper laid down by the mother's mapping of the infant body. As the authority who regulates the infant's drives, she not only satisfies thirst and hunger, but exerts control over the excretion and disposal of bodily wastes. Simply put, the abject is considered excess to identity just as excreta is excess to the body and its expulsion necessary to life.

Kristeva associates the abject 'with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*' which she links with sex and murder, explaining that 'by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order

to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism' (12-13). So, too, the criminal, the profane, the insane, taboo sexualities, the half-caste, the infectious are shunned by society, cast out of its territory and, because the sign represses the abject, its discourse. As Kristeva explains, '[i]t is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (4).

Abjection finds its prototype in the child's separation from the mother as the condition of its entry into language. Abjection ruptures their union, a relationship in which the child knows no borders. Like Carter, Kristeva links spatial and discursive dimensions, but the semiotic *chora*, a space 'without interior or exterior', is essentially pre-linguistic and its contents pre-objects. As Kelly Oliver points out in her commentary on Kristeva, its disposition is 'based on the primal mother-child relationship. It is the rhythms and sounds of their bodies together fused into one' (34). Just as the settler defines himself in relation to the beyond, it is only by constructing borders of identity that the individual can conceive of himself as an autonomous being. Consequently, the mother must be made repugnant. How else can the sublime *jouissance* of the mother-child relationship be relinquished?

In *Billy Sunday*, the sexual relationship between the teenage Turner and his Winnebago lover, Jane Whitecloud, emulates the primal *jouissance* of the *chora*. In the act of sexual intercourse, he enjoys a way of seeing and of knowing which both transcends and transgresses the boundaries of language. Through this act, the youth enters the primeval world of the Temple Woods and wordlessly accesses the memory of Jane's tribe. What he experiences corresponds to Kristeva's definition of the sublime: 'The sublime "object" dissolves in the raptures of a bottomless memory. It is such a memory, which, from stopping point to stopping point, remembrance to remembrance, love to love, transfers that object to the refulgent point of the dazzlement' (12). Suggesting a return to intra-uterine life and rebirth, the sexual act is described as a retreat 'to a place of deep shade, so dark, so easeful that he felt his own face, his own thoughts go dark; then there was an eruption of light' (*Billy Sunday* 190).

With this imagery, Jones links the corporeal with the frontier landscape. The deep shade and portentous silence of the forest also invoke the maternal *chora* as a nameless space where the name of the father is foreclosed or absent. Oliver glosses the *chora* as the site of the 'unnameable, that which is heterogeneous to ... signifying practice', in other words, what negates or is surplus to meaning (34). It is a place without 'identity' or 'reason' in respect to the Symbolic, lawless in respect to the Law of the Father which prohibits it. The excesses of the frontier, represented in *Billy Sunday* by sex and murder, occur in the absence of the paternal authority, though arguably without the regulatory function of the maternal in discharging that excess. Thus, we might understand the historical Turner's contention—reiterated in the novel—of 'a return to primitive conditions' on the frontier where 'For a moment ... the bonds of custom are broken and unrestraint is triumphant' (260).

In fact, Turner experiences sexual intercourse as a sensation of drowning, suggesting a lack of distinction between inside and outside, self and other. However, it is the revelation of Jane's pregnancy which initiates the process of abjection that ruptures their union. Marriage and fatherhood are overwhelming prospects to this fifteen-year-old boy 'of good family': they represent the excess or surplus of meaning threatening the borders of identity. His relationship with Jane, formerly pure and innocent, or in Kristevan terms, 'clean and proper (in the sense of incorporated and incorporable) becomes filthy, the sought-after turns into the banished, fascination into shame' (8).

Viewed thus, Jane is made abject, becoming what Kristeva refers to as 'simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become *alter ego*, drops so that "I" does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence' (9).

The Fall is allegorised in this, Turner's 'original sin', and both he and Jane are finally exiles from a frontier Paradise. With the sanction of an indulgent father, he abandons Jane and the unborn Billy Sunday to return to his home in urban Madison. In doing so, he forfeits not only Jane's love—and, indirectly, her life—but 'the Fred Turner he had thought himself to be, humane, ambitious, noble, decent, the life that still seemed bathed in the sunshine of promise' (199). He is yet to understand that this is the founding moment of his manhood and 'that whenever he was with a woman he would return to that first place ... Nor would he really understand for the next fifteen years why he returned to Balsam Point every summer' (200).

Kristeva explains that the abject

beseches, worries, fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects ... But simultaneously ... is drawn towards an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself. (1)

The narrative of *Billy Sunday* charts this same cycle of return, beginning when Turner returns to the frontier two years later. Learning of Jane's suicide, he is overcome with guilt and haunted by the spectral image of the dead girl. Although her image is never entirely wholesome—'There was the smell of faeces on her, gritted deep into the weave of her skin'—he at first experiences desire for his lost lover (65). However, transformed by a horror of his lost integrity, Jane's image is gradually defiled by disease and decay as her corpse becomes one with the forest floor.

The significance of Jones's imagery is explained by Kristeva's contention that 'refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live' (3). However, 'If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything' (3). Turner becomes ill and a miasma of disease pervades the images of the forest which visit him in his dreams:

All that time he spent in his sickbed, he was physically away from that most feared place. But in the pitiless fevers, he was back there again. The smells of the damp earth, vegetation and faeces spread all around him, contaminating him' (218).

No longer a world green and fresh, a sacred place promising a new order of existence, it is a land of 'lakes and swamps infested with mosquitoes', filling his room with the smell of 'rotting fish' (219; 220). The frontier itself is made abject, loathsome and unclean.

Finally, in his fever, Turner returns to the forest to bury Jane, unable 'to face a moment longer the thought of her being dead because of him' (221). In this symbolic act, borders are provisionally restored, the contagion to his identity removed. Assuming a mask of normality, he resolves 'to live with his secret, to hide it away until that event might be shrouded in time, until the glacier of forgetfulness should creep down and cover the contours of the remembered landscape. Balsam Point might be forgotten, at last' (224). However, according to Kristeva, the abject is 'a *land of oblivion* that is constantly remembered' (8).

As the one by whom the abject exists, Turner at thirty, writer of historical works, interpreter of maps and census reports, is what Kristeva names the 'deject' who, 'Instead of sounding himself as to his "being" ... does so concerning his place' (8). Described as a 'stray', 'A deviser of territories, languages, works, the *deject* never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines—for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject—constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh' (8). It is a definition which illuminates the historical Turner's description of a continually advancing frontier and his fictional counterpart's consciousness of 'the still sick part of himself, a dark place without speech ... listening for the clue, the single word carelessly uttered, which would be for him the beacon, the fire on the road' (49).

In the summer of 1892, intending to revive a childhood ambition to 'become the poet of the frontier', Turner makes his annual pilgrimage to Balsam Point (47). Having aspired to 'create a world of wonder, a poem which revealed the hidden forces shaping American life and institutions, a secret order of existence, hitherto unsuspected, born in the woods of the Pilgrims', he finds his own heart of darkness instead (261). He returns to Madison to write his frontier thesis, conscious of 'another America, a stain on the soul of the frontier experience which drove men mad with shame' (262). Though aware that his vision could only be expressed like music or poetry, he is compelled by convention to 'deal only with historical facts' (258). Nevertheless, in spite of emphasising the positive aspects of the frontier,

the dark dream of America he had denied began to seep into his history, quite independent of his own intentions, different from anything he wanted his 'poem of America' to be. The nightmare existed beyond his own making, pushing up through the floor of the forest' (262).

It is also against his own nightmare that he constructs boundaries. His 'spiky wakefulness imitates the Pilgrim Fathers, who constructed around their little settlements a defence of pickets to keep the bewitching wilderness at bay' (264). Only in his dreams does Turner wander 'beyond his own little picket fence, to he knew not where, as the dreamer steps from a cliff's edge into the chasm, into darkness' (265). There he confronts his abject-self which, in Kristevan terms, is the subject's recognition that 'all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundation of its own being' (5).

The nightmare sequence echoes a passage early in the novel when, 'In his dream state', Turner hears Jane's

sobbing in the trees, a sound whose echo pursues men all their lives, a sadness they silently pass on to their wives and children, even when the occasion itself, the woman's face and name are all forgotten, even when the men are middle-aged and old and dying and all that is left is the moment of uncertainty, the vague nauseous feeling that the way of the world is always like this and all we can do, finally, is go to sleep. (74)

A meditation on masculinity, the protagonist's silence provides a context within which to understand the production of collective histories. Later, Turner equates the undiscovered truths of history to 'What no other man can know about you. What you hardly dare to know about yourself. Because we will not allow ourselves to know it' (267).

Having taken the notion of evolution which the historical Turner discerned on the frontier, Jones's narrative supports the notion of a 'perennial rebirth' but not, after all,

a redemption. Speaking with Ramona Koval in a broadcast interview, Jones said that

in the end the forest in the book is a kind of American unconscious, and as we know only too well in Australia, the facts and process of settlement and the effects of white settlement on indigenous people is something that's swept into the sub-conscious and continues to fester and fester and fester, and continues to subtly shape the sort of national consciousness and to continue to exude a stench and to create a guilt in the way that the world is perceived. (Koval 7)

The final image of Turner listening 'to the sound of the howls across the lake, as if they were the last organ chord of the hymn of the frontier expiring' bespeaks the loss of a sense of unbounded possibility but, equally, the loss of the opportunity to understand how it came to be forfeited (287). As John Lechte points out, 'Through a refusal to confront the abject ... a fundamental aspect of individual and social life remains in oblivion, and our understanding and capacity to cope are thereby diminished' (158). As such, I would suggest that Rod Jones has written a novel about the American frontier which resonates with issues of land and identity preoccupying Australians in 1997.

Notes

1. Connell notes that 'Loss of control at the frontier is a recurring theme in the history of empires, and is closely connected with the making of masculine exemplars' (187).

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