

## Reviews

---

*The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America.* By Greg Grandin. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019. 370 pages, sources, notes, index.

In the summer of 2015, Donald Trump descended the escalator of his posh, Fifth Avenue tower to announce his candidacy for President of the United States. Condemning illegal immigration and the North American Free Trade Agreement, Trump declared his intentions: “I will build a great wall.” And with this declaration and subsequent actions, as historian Greg Grandin, a professor of history at Yale University and a previous finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for 2009’s *Fordlandia*, demonstrates in this timely book, Trump has supplanted the symbol of the frontier, representative of imagined limitless and universalism, a “proxy for liberation, synonymous with the possibilities and promises of modern life itself” (7), with the symbol of a wall, denoting restraint, boundaries, and limits, as America’s “new myth” (9). Nearly one hundred and twenty-five years after historian Frederick Jackson Turner famously articulated the significance of the frontier in American history and declared it closed, Grandin argues the *myth* of the frontier, too, has ended.

*The End of the Myth* is a sweeping account, spanning over four hundred years, beginning with the European colonization of the Americas in the seventeenth century, the subjugation, enslavement, and killing of indigenous peoples, and the perpetual recreation promised by westward expansion. For early colonists, “Expansion,” Grandin notes, “became the an-

swer to every question, the solution to all problems, especially those caused by expansion” (30). Benjamin Franklin understood the continent’s abundant resources would provide a swelling populace with labor and wages and give the nation’s bustling manufacturing economy much-needed agricultural supply. Meanwhile, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison believed westward expansion essential to American democracy and freedom. As Madison wrote in Federalist 10, “extend the sphere” to protect the rights of citizens from “mob majority or a tyrannical minority.”

Yet despite the significance of westward expansion in the post-independence era, by the early nineteenth century, the terms “frontier,” “border,” and “boundary” were still synonymous, used interchangeably, and were not yet endowed with mythic or identity-defining powers. In fact, the first English dictionary published in the United States did not even include an entry for “frontier.” However, as Euro-Americans embarked on a new century, one that would be defined by the coordinated removal and extermination of Native Americans, the enslavement and forced labor of Africans and African Americans, and the suppression of ethnic Mexicans, the concept of a frontier would be transformed. As Grandin writes, the frontier became “a state of mind, a cultural zone, a sociological term of comparison, a type of society, an adjective, a noun, a national myth, a disciplining mechanism, an abstraction, and an aspiration” (116). The frontier became a way of life for white America, a home for race-based violence and the perpetuation of white supremacy.

Cultural Analysis 17.2 (2020): R1-R14  
© 2020 by The University of California.  
All rights reserved

At the end of the nineteenth century, Frederick Jackson Turner “emancipated” the concept of “frontier,” crediting “the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward” for “American development” (113). Turner’s “Frontier Thesis” revolutionized the way future generations would come to conceptualize American history, identity, and politics. American greatness did not originate in Europe, as “germ theory” had long posited, but emerged, as Turner described, in the transformation of nature, for through the process of taming the wild, Euro-Americans developed independence, initiative, and individualism, which, later, would blossom into society, capitalism, and democracy. This order of settlement—first, the individual and then, only later, the government—is an oft-misunderstood point, especially when used to define the relationship between economy, rights, and sovereignty. Grandin notes how politicians have used Turner to limit the state’s role to only protecting those inherent, individual rights—the right to *have, to bear, to move, to assemble, to believe, to possess*—that existed in nature *before* the arrival of government. A similar line of reasoning is also used to delegitimize legislation on expanding social or economic rights, such as the right to receive health care, education, and welfare (124). These arguments, Grandin argues, reflect a misunderstanding of Turner, who elsewhere acknowledged the government’s role in bringing settlers west and, ultimately, believed the frontier would lead to the creation of a stable social democracy rooted in cooperation, progress, and equality.

For me, Grandin is at his best when he, like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. before him, describes how the existence of a

frontier has “allowed the United States to avoid a true reckoning with its social problems, such as economic inequality, racism, crime and punishment, and violence” (4). In so doing, Grandin separates this book from the work of other scholars of the American West like Richard White, Patricia Limerick, and Richard Slotkin. For while *The End of the Myth* examines many of the same significant figures and events that shaped the frontier, the book is most provocative when it illustrates how, first, the frontier, and, later, the *myth* of the frontier have been used to channel white hostility, resentment, and extremism on the one hand, and to reject, as un-American, efforts to expand social rights to all Americans on the other. By the time Trump announced his candidacy in the summer of 2015, Americans had grown suspicious of the myth of the frontier after decades of “new” frontiers and promises of continued expansion in an ever-flattening, shrinking world. Trump’s wall is America’s new symbol, representing a nation that “no longer pretends, in a world of limits, that everyone can be free—and enforces that reality through cruelty, domination, and racism” (275).

*The End of Myth* is a superbly written intellectual history of the role of the frontier in America’s past and present. Grandin expertly situates contemporary calls from the political right to fortify the borders with the racial animus that animated portions of white America throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, just as he connects the growing popularity of social democracy among younger voters of the political left with earlier attempts to expand social rights.

**Brant W. Ellsworth**  
Central Pennsylvania College

*The Story of Myth*. Sarah Iles Johnston, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018. Pp. ix + 359, note on transliterations and abbreviations, notes, references, index, acknowledgments, index of names and terms, index locorum.

**T**he *Story of Myth* seeks to examine the nature of Greek myths as narratives and then explores the power these narratives held to foster and sustain belief. More specifically, author Sarah Iles Johnston argues that “particularly during the Archaic and Classical periods... hearing myths narrated and watching myths performed... contributed substantially to the Greeks’ belief that gods and heroes existed and could wield significant power over humans” (8). However, Johnston also asserts that the goal of these Greek narrators was not to “induce belief” but rather “to tell engaging stories, which often carried institutional or personal agendas, as well” (284). Inducing belief, instead, was an unintended but significant consequence of the Greek myths’ engaging narratives and their particular narrative elements.

Johnston is delightfully methodical in her investigation. In the book’s first chapter, Johnston neatly describes her goals and methodologies. *The Story of Myth* employs comparativism across cultures and genres of narratives—including not only mythic narratives of other cultures but also fairytales, contemporary novels, and television series—as well as close readings of Greek myths framed within the understanding of these works as literary creations. In explaining how myths as narrative works created and fostered beliefs, the book draws from previous

analyses in narratology, sociology, and folkloristics to create its decidedly fresh testament to the lasting power of myth and, therefore, of story.

Beyond its first chapter, the book consists of six subsequent chapters—of which Johnston helpfully provides summaries in the book’s introductory chapter—and an epilogue. Chapter 2 argues firmly against the historical “ritualist approach” held by scholars that directly connected myths and rituals, and in its extreme form, asserted that “myths were created in order to explain or justify the existence of rituals” (34). Johnston soundly demonstrates that the transmission of Greek *aita*, or “myths that tell about the origin of a ritual” (22), did not by any means occur solely in conjunction with ritual, nor were rituals always accompanied by such *aita*.

Chapter 3 focuses on how Greek myths “emotionally and cognitively” engaged audiences (66). Johnston cites the dramatic and skillful performances of these myths as the source of such engagements, and, when these performances occurred together with festivals, they further underscored the premise of both: that gods and heroes existed and routinely interacted with mortals. In this chapter of *The Story of Myth*, Johnston makes a particularly interesting comparison between the contemporary parasocial relationships of fans with celebrities and Greeks with the characters of myths. Chapter 4 then further serves to investigate how myths engaged audiences by examining the “story world” of Greek myths. Here, Johnston asserts that Greeks preferred portraying the “Secondary World”—the imagined setting of Greek myths—closely within the

established parameters of the “Primary World”—the real world in which the Greeks lived—with only the addition of a few key supernatural elements. This lends credence to both the belief that these stories occurred in a larger narrative framework and that the supernatural could reasonably impact the Greek’s existing world (146).

Chapter 5 explores the plurimedial—represented across various media—and accretive—acquiring traits across those various media—nature of the Greek myths’ characters. *The Story of Myth* notes that the constantly reiterating conceptions of the characters of Greek myths are encapsulated under the characters’ names, allowing for the preservation of core character identities and the enabling of constant revitalizations of these characters. This chapter also argues that the fallible nature of Greek gods and heroes—despite their supernatural abilities—allowed for more interesting narratives and more relatability for their Greek audiences.

Chapters 6 and 7 depart somewhat from the investigations of chapters 3–5 as they examine not the general manner in which Greek myths engaged audiences—through engaging performances and their connections with festivals and the “Primary World,” i.e., the lived world of the Greeks for example—but on specific narrative elements of Greek myths: metamorphoses and heroes. In these chapters, Johnston investigates the use of these narrative elements using specific Greek myths as case studies. While other myth traditions often feature shape-shifting and fairytales feature ultimately reversible transformations, Greek myths feature metamorphoses—permanent

changes from human to animal, plant, or creature—far more prominently. Such myths “challenge the ontological boundaries of the world” (179) and express Greek anxieties about the boundaries between humans and animals as well as the extent of the gods’ power.

In chapter 7, Johnston notes the omnipresence and mass cultural appeal of heroes within Greek myths, defined by Johnston as “humans who either are born with or acquire status and abilities beyond that of other humans which they retain after death and can use to benefit the living humans who worship them” (222). Johnston emphasizes that the mortality of heroes necessitated narrative arcs within myths wherein each hero is born, lives, and dies. In contrast, the stories of immortal gods do not necessitate the progressive change that makes narratives more compelling to audiences. The story of the remarkable human, as a narrative by humans and for human audiences, also provided these myths their lasting draw.

*The Story of Myth* truly is an engaging and thoroughly well-supported investigation of how Greek myths served to support Greek belief in gods and heroes. Johnston is consistently deliberate and organized in every argument she makes, beginning each section with an outline of exactly what she plans to argue and how she will argue it, before completing said argument with compelling precision. Perhaps most vitally, the book outright invites similar investigations of the power of narratives as sustainers of belief. With its frequent comparisons between the narratives of Greek myths and those of other cultures—including those of contemporary media—the book actively

encourages the reader to question how these other narratives sustain belief and what exactly those beliefs may be. For these reasons, *The Story of Myth* is a must-read for those interested in narratology, sociology, or folkloristics, and most assuredly will spark further explorations into the topic of myths as narratives.

**Rebecca Worhach**  
*Pennsylvania State, Harrisburg*

*Expressions of Sufi Culture in Tajikistan*. By Benjamin Gatling. Folklore Studies in a Multicultural World. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018. Pp. xiii+233 pages, acknowledgments, introduction, notes, bibliography, index.

In his *Expressions of Sufi Culture in Tajikistan*, Benjamin Gatling provides a first-hand insight into the post-Soviet Sufism in the nation-state of Tajikistan. Employing an ethnographic approach, Gatling examines a wide range of expressive forms to demonstrate how Sufis transcend the oppressive politics against religious communities of contemporary Tajikistan. Through a close encounter with nostalgia, historical narratives, ritual, and embodied practices, Gatling shows how Tajik Sufis associate their faith and practice with the religious and expressive traditions of Central Asian Islam. Gatling explains this relationship through an investigation of different eras and conceptualizations: the Persian sacred past, the paradoxical present, and the Soviet era. By observing how the Sufis think, act, and negotiate their world, Gatling offers new insight into how Sufis in Tajikistan construct their identity as Muslims in contemporary Central Asia.

The in-depth ethnographic fieldwork in Tajikistan enables Gatling to go beyond classical theoretical frameworks of James Scott's "hidden transcript" and Alexei Yurchak's "performative masks," and illustrate that the persistence of the Sufi past in the present is "media for action" (16). In other words, he shows that Sufi narratives are not simply an act of resistance, but a way to shape the Sufi experiences of the present. By exploring the

relationship between Sufi's expressive forms and politics, and their agency over the state's homogenizing narratives, the author indicates how tradition provides "agency's grammar" that "enabled forms of life that transcended the state and the lurking presence of its security apparatus" (15).

The book contains an introduction, six chapters, and an epilogue. Most of Gatling's writing relies on first-hand sources and original research data. He meticulously examines the works of Tajik Sufi books as "material communication" and how these books "materialized sainthood" and "carried with them special traces of saintly power" (17). Further, Gatling asserts that the textual artifacts of Tajik Islam are not limited to printed forms, but they circulate within the boundaries of oral performances. Gatling also elaborates on *zikir* (remembrance), a contemplative practice generally assigned to followers by their shaykh, whose authority in providing the *zikir* extends back to the prophet through an unbroken initiatory chain. His ethnographic data shows that while, according to this norm of practice, *zikir* cannot be composed in the present time, there are frequent uses of recently composed poetries during the *zikir* ritual events. This finding paves the path to new research about the complex relationship between the assigned *zikir* formulae, the practitioners, the shaykhs (Sufi masters), and authoritative Sufi pasts.

Gatling's methodology of ethnography of the Sufis in Tajikistan can be helpful for scholars who aim at working on Sufi communities from a different perspective than the prevalent Sufi studies frameworks. He offers reflections on defining the spatial and temporal boundar-

ies of his study and emphasizes the roles of hagiographies, prayer manuals, and other Sufi texts along with interviews and participation as the primary sources of data in studying and understanding Sufism in Tajikistan. Gatling's approach in understanding Sufi life differs from the enigmas of "transcendent reality" and "Sufi knowledge," which "only exists within the context of an initiate's ongoing relationship with a pir" (8). This approach enables the author to expand his research to include religious life among the Sufis instead of concentrating exclusively on "Tajik Islam."

Concerning the terminology used in the book, Gatling collects various Tajik terms such as *ahli tariqat* (people of the path), *tariqati* (of the path), *tasavvufi* (people of Sufism) and translates all of them as "Sufi" without commenting on the differences between their literal meanings (9). While it looks justifiable to use the term "Sufism" in its broad sense in western scholarship for convenience, it fails to depict the historical debate over its use when referring to the followers of the Sufi path indifferently. Moreover, his ethnography shows that the term Sufi is seldomly used by the followers in Tajikistan in describing themselves and their practice. Additional information about the differences between the variety of terms used by Tajik Sufis in self-description could have added great insights into the religious, social, and political reasons behind the followers' reluctance in using the term.

Gatling's book can be read in conversation with *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi'ism* by Karen Ruffle and *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discours-*

*es in Modern Shi'i Islam* by Kamran Scott Aghaie. These books use an ethnographic lens in studying the socio-religious roles of women within the minority Shi'i groups and challenge the patriarchal narratives that present men as religious figures. Readers will benefit from the comparison between different ethnographic methodologies among minority groups and find other perspectives in further studying Sufism in Tajikistan.

*Expressions of Sufi Culture in Tajikistan* contributes significantly to the scholarship of Sufism, even though it could have had benefitted more from engagement with other Sufi Studies. Gatling offers a rich and a new perspective in the studies of Islam in Tajikistan. His study provides a broader picture of Islam in everyday life and recent history instead of merely focusing on the concept of Islamic revival in the post-Soviet Union era and the rise of fundamentalism, which are predominantly the main subjects of many studies on Tajikistan. In closing, *Expressions of Sufi Culture in Tajikistan* is a precious contribution in the field of Islamic and religious studies. Gatling's multilayered study of Sufism in Tajikistan combining ethnography with nuanced theoretical discussions is also a great addition to the fields of folklore, Central Asian studies, and cultural studies. The book is both engaging and accessible, and an excellent resource for upper-level undergraduate and graduate students.

**Azadeh Vatanpour**  
Emory University

*Craving Supernatural Creatures: German Fairy-Tale Figures in American Pop Culture*. By Claudia Schwabe. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019. 293 pages, notes, index.

In Charles Perrault's 1697 rendition of the Little Red Riding Hood story, "Le Petit Chaperon Rouge," a young girl is greedily devoured by a hungry, beastly wolf. In the 2005 film *Hoodwinked!* (directed by Corey Edwards), the wolf becomes an investigative reporter and works both against and with Little Red Riding Hood to solve a case of theft and deception. The two tales, recognizable in their shared elements of wolves, red-capped girls, and grandmotherly disguises, diverge widely in their interpretation of characters. Both, however, are grounded in moral lessons. Both tales also rely on a sense of the uncanny to establish their narratives and connect the audience to the characters. That uncanniness, the sense of being unfamiliar or perhaps not quite at home, can be as dizzying as trying to compare Perrault's literary rendition of the red-cap tale (ATU 333) with a 2005 children's animated feature film, but in *Craving Supernatural Creatures*, Claudia Schwabe uses that head-spinning and unsettling dissonance to reconcile the oral and literary stories of the past with their popular culture interpretations of the present. Primarily, Schwabe is concerned with the way contemporary renditions of fairy-tale narratives rehabilitate and humanize the monstrous or villainous characters in the stories. She explores how "North American media culture takes the uncanny or *unheimlich* fairy-tale figures of German fairy-tale tradition...and recasts

them as *heimlich* creatures that appear familiar” (21). Through the process of reimagining, Schwabe asserts, American pop culture reframes the stories to topple accepted moral interpretations and offer something fresh in ways that highlight the characters’ personal identities and complex emotional states.

In *Craving Supernatural Creatures*, four distinct types receive this makeover from unambiguous villains to fleshed-out characters: automatons, witches, wolves, and dwarfs. To examine these character types, Schwabe primarily draws upon the several versions of the Grimms’ *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, although she also includes other German literary sources such as Goethe and Ludwig Tieck, along with several non-German authors like Perrault and J. R. R. Tolkien.

Schwabe begins with a dissection of the automaton—the quintessential flat character, a soulless being, often programmed by its creator, with no personality of its own, Foundin stories like “The Golem” or Tieck’s *Die Vogelscheuche* (*The Scarecrow*, 1835), the author reframes this figure by comparing it to its contemporary counterparts. The traditional automaton calls up the underlying discomfort of something animate and humanoid, yet without the moral and spiritual endowments that supposedly guide humanity. Connected to contemporary renditions of pop culture golems such as *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) and *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), automaton figures are imbued with purpose and emotional depth in ways that evoke deep sympathy from the audience. Schwabe also points out that even through this imaginative rehabilitation, tensions over doppelgangers and artificial humans linger, and

she cites the chilling fears found in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) that arise again in films like the 1975 *The Stepford Wives* and its 2004 remake.

In Chapter Two, Schwabe turns her attention to the witches and evil queens of Grimm and Disney. Specifically, she explores the tale of “Schneewittchen” (“Snow White”) with an eye toward the 1937 Disney film interpretation. The German tale places a dark emphasis on pubescent transformation, cannibalistic rituals, and the brutal final punishment of the antagonist, which sits in sharp contrast to Disney’s muted rendition of these themes. The Queen’s death in Disney’s film, for example, is meted out by nature rather than enforced by a sinister human justice of dancing to death in red-hot iron shoes before an assembled crowd. From the seeds of these differences, tendrils of rehabilitative imagination transform the Wicked Queen and other fairy tale witches into sympathetic characters, with even the Disney version finding redemption in the *Once Upon a Time* television series (2011-2018). Schwabe notes that in other recent media the character may be portrayed as evil, as in Michael Cohn’s *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* (1997) and Rupert Sanders’s *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), or comical, as in Tarsem Singh’s *Mirror Mirror* (2012), but all renditions seek to flesh out her motivations and background, humanizing her magic beyond mere sorcerous vanity and dealing with questions of motherhood or family politics.

Chapters Three and Four turn toward the monstrous body, and focus on the tale of Little Red Riding Hood and on the stock characters of dwarfs (sometimes “dwarves”) in German lore and contem-



porary American pop culture. Schwabe points out that the sexualization of the story—clearly present in Perrault’s concluding moral—became muted in the Grimm version, only to be resurrected in tales like Angela Carter’s “The Company of Wolves” (1979) and Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Into the Woods* (1986). She makes some strange leaps at times, at one point asserting that Red Riding Hood is “primarily a male creation and projection” only a few pages after pointing out that the Grimm brothers received their version of the tale from sisters Jeanette and Marie Hassenpflug (171). She also contends with the Freudian lens and the lasting legacy of Bettelheim’s reading of the tale as one of father figures and castration, but manages to reposition the discussion as one about the intrusion of the “wild” onto the “home” rather than any strict parental fantasies. Schwabe shows how later refigurings of the wolf character emphasize the feelings of control and release, using the key sidekick in the television series *Grimm* (2011–2017)—a werewolf named Monroe who essentially adopts a “reformed” lifestyle because of the stories *he* grew up with of Grimm descendants hunting his kind (178–79).

While wolf characters reveal an inner struggle with the wild, dwarfs, for Schwabe, are far more about outer layers of diversity. She elucidates the ways that dwarfs in pre-twentieth-century fairy tales often are stripped of individuality, and even the term “dwarf” can be interchangeable with other creatures such as elves or gnomes. The dehumanization of different-bodied persons makes them uniformly comical, dangerous, or undesirable, and traits such as greed and

lechery (or conversely complete sexlessness) override any sense of personality. Contemporary dwarfs in pop culture, ranging from the seven in Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* to those in Peter Jackson’s *Hobbit* films, all work to create strongly differentiated bodies and characters. Some narratives dispense with the dwarf entirely, instead focusing exclusively on the differentiation, as in Joe Nussbaum’s *Sydney White* (2007) which reimagines the dwarfs as “seven dorks” with traits that map onto Disney’s characters. In addition, Schwabe spends a good bit of time looking at one well-defined dwarfish character: Rumpelstiltskin. She follows him into television’s *Once Upon a Time* through the character of Mr. Gold, who lives with a disability that sets him apart bodily and marks him as a dwarf type, even though he plays a number of different roles ranging from the Beast from *Beauty and the Beast* to the Crocodile from *Peter Pan*.

Throughout her work, Schwabe sees the struggles of the monstrous “Other” in contemporary retellings as a way of dealing with contemporary issues. Audiences seek redemption for the Other, even when they are also villainous, because the emphasis on individuality and heterogeneity also ask for “increased mutual tolerance” and an “acceptance of differences” (293). She looks to the critiques of modern fairy tale adaptations of Jack Zipes without embracing some of his more cynical points about modernized tellings and draws upon fairy tale scholars like Maria Tatar and Cristina Bacchilega to augment and expand her interpretations of the villainous witches and wolves. Importantly, Schwabe also looks to the audiences of these narratives

## Reviews

to support her points. She incorporates digital culture through viewer responses in online forums and even notes how players of video games like Disney's *Kingdom Hearts* often embrace the monsters and villains more fully than the heroes. The interpretive process, she says, is one that makes space for the monsters in our world, one that offers young children glamorized *Monster High* or movies like Disney's *Descendants* (2015) as a way to embrace marginalized identities, such as disabled bodies or LGBTQ orientations. When we redeem the monsters, Schwabe shows, they can help redeem us.

**Cory Thomas Hutcheson**

*Kutztown University of Pennsylvania*