

# Mythic Frontiers by Daniel Maher

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## Introduction

Daniel R. Maher's *Mythic Frontiers: Remembering, Forgetting, and Profiting with Cultural Heritage Tourism* examines how Fort Smith, Arkansas, has packaged the American frontier for visitors. The original review identifies Maher's concern with profit, white privilege, colonial violence, sexism, and the mythology surrounding Judge Isaac Parker. It reverses several arguments, however, by treating Parker as a corrective voice who opposed the tourist myths and by suggesting that Maher neglected central frontier historians whom his book actually engages. Maher's object is not to prove that every heritage story is false. He shows how institutions select, stage, and monetize certain memories while making conquest and inequality less visible (Maher, 2016).

## The Frontier Complex

Maher calls the recurring system of stories, attractions, symbols, and political assumptions the "frontier complex." It includes the heroic lawman, dangerous outlaw, civilized settlement, empty land, gallows, brothel, gunfight, and promise of individual opportunity. These images appear in tourism, film, museums, reenactment, architecture, and public policy. The complex is powerful because its parts reinforce one another and feel familiar before a visitor arrives. A gallows can appear to prove that the frontier required harsh justice, while a Western film makes the gallows seem historically inevitable. Maher asks readers to examine how familiarity becomes authority and how an entertainment genre turns into public memory (Slotkin, 1992).

## Five Overlapping Eras

The book organizes the frontier complex into five overlapping eras: removal, restraint, reservation, recreation, and redoubling. Removal concerns the displacement of Native peoples and the expansion of U.S. power. Restraint examines federal law and violence in Indian Territory. Reservation traces new forms of confinement and governance. Recreation describes twentieth-century tourism and popular entertainment, while redoubling considers the renewed use of frontier imagery in a deindustrializing economy. The categories are analytical rather than clean chronological boxes. They show that the frontier did not simply close when settlement reached the Pacific. Its political and emotional functions continued through institutions that recreated the past for new audiences.

## Fort Smith as a Case Study

Fort Smith is useful because it stood at the boundary between Arkansas and Indian Territory and later developed a tourism economy around courts, marshals, outlaws, executions, and commercial sex. The National Historic Site, restored Miss Laura's Social Club, public events, and planned museums create a network through which visitors encounter a Western identity. Maher treats this local case as evidence of a broader American process. Heritage development promises revenue, civic pride, and downtown renewal, especially after manufacturing decline. The problem is not that tourism earns money. It is that economic pressure can reward the most recognizable and dramatic version of history even when that version narrows public understanding (National Park Service, n.d.).

## Judge Isaac Parker and the "Hanging Judge"

Popular memory presents Isaac C. Parker as the stern "Hanging Judge" who imposed order on a lawless territory. Maher does not claim that Parker personally designed modern gallows advertising, nor does Parker appear as the book's critic of frontier mythology. Instead, Maher analyzes how later institutions magnified Parker's executions and jurisdiction while minimizing the federal court's role in colonial governance. Parker sometimes criticized the mandatory death penalty and considered himself a defender of law, but the effects of his court extended through a system imposed upon Native nations. Historical complexity requires attention to Parker's intentions, legal constraints, actual record, and the political structure his courtroom served.

## The Gallows as Heritage Object

The reconstructed gallows condense the frontier complex into one compelling visual object. Visitors can stand near an apparatus of execution, imagine danger, and experience the emotional thrill of proximity to death. Interpretation may present hanging as evidence that justice finally controlled criminals, but the spectacle can detach punishment from law, race, sovereignty, and the people executed. A gallows is not neutral architecture. Its display decides whether visitors encounter a technology of state killing, a tourist icon, a moral warning, or a heroic symbol of order. Maher's analysis asks who gains authority when violence is staged as inevitable and whose suffering is converted into entertainment.

## Native Nations and the Myth of Empty Space

Frontier stories often imagine expansion into empty or underused land, making Indigenous sovereignty appear as an obstacle to progress rather than a prior political reality. Fort Smith's federal jurisdiction in Indian Territory cannot be understood without removal treaties, contested authority, and U.S. intervention in Native affairs. Maher emphasizes that simplified narratives "other" the people

who stood in the path of manifest destiny. An inclusive heritage site should identify nations, treaties, legal conflicts, and Native perspectives rather than speak vaguely of wilderness and outlaws. The purpose is not to add one multicultural panel to an unchanged story. It is to reconsider what event counts as settlement, crime, resistance, and justice.

## Bass Reeves and the Invincible Marshal

Bass Reeves, a Black deputy U.S. marshal, has increasingly become a celebrated frontier figure. Recognition corrects the long erasure of Black law officers, but Maher warns that representation can still remain mythic when one exceptional hero is used to validate the whole system. Reeves's skill and career deserve careful study, including the constraints of race and federal service. At the same time, the institution he served participated in contested governance of Indian Territory. Heritage interpretation should resist two extremes: excluding Reeves from the story or turning him into proof that the frontier order was fully just and inclusive. Individual achievement and structural criticism can coexist.

## Miss Laura's and the "Hello Bordello"

The restored brothel associated with Laura Zeigler is marketed through colorful stories of vice, entrepreneurship, and entertainment. Such interpretation can make prostitution appear as charming local flavor while minimizing coercion, poverty, violence, disease, and the limited choices available to many women. Maher's "hello bordello" discussion shows how sexual history becomes safe when viewed from a comfortable distance and filtered through romantic comedy. A responsible site can still discuss architecture, business, regulation, and individual agency, but it should not reduce women to decorative evidence of a lively town. Gender analysis asks who controlled money, movement, reputation, and legal protection within the historical economy.

## Tourism, Neoliberalism, and Deindustrialization

Maher connects frontier heritage with contemporary economic policy. When industrial employment declines, cities often seek growth through branding, attractions, festivals, and cultural consumption. Frontier identity can be marketed as a local asset that appears to require little conflict because audiences already know the genre. The promise that tourism will "bring it home" transfers hope toward competitive place marketing and private development. Maher describes this as cruel optimism when attachment to the heritage project persists despite uncertain economic returns and social costs. His argument does not deny that tourism can create jobs. It questions who receives benefits, who bears public expense, and which history must be simplified to make the product saleable.

## Remembering and Forgetting

Public memory is produced through selection. Every exhibit omits something because time and space are limited, but omissions become political when the same groups and conflicts disappear repeatedly. Fort Smith's frontier story can remember Parker, marshals, and dramatic criminals while forgetting removal, colonial authority, racial exclusion, labor, women's vulnerability, and Native governance. Forgetting does not always require an explicit lie. It can occur through architecture, sequence, tone, or the absence of names. Maher's central contribution is to show that profitable remembrance and historical forgetting operate together. The memorable object gains clarity partly because surrounding complications have been pushed out of view (Shackel, 2003).

## Myth, Falsehood, and Cultural Meaning

One useful criticism from reviewers is that the book sometimes treats myth too close to falsehood. Myths do more than state inaccurate facts; they organize identity, value, ritual, and emotion. A visitor may know that a reenactment is staged yet still experience it as a meaningful connection with national character. Understanding that symbolic power can strengthen Maher's analysis. Correcting dates will not by itself displace the frontier complex because people are attached to its promises of autonomy, order, and renewal. Heritage professionals must therefore offer alternative stories that are emotionally and aesthetically compelling as well as factually precise. Demythologization without meaningful replacement may leave the old structure intact (Hansen, 2016; Wrobel, 2017).

## Method and Interdisciplinary Value

Maher combines anthropology, heritage studies, history, tourism analysis, observation, and interpretation of material culture. This interdisciplinary method allows him to move from a reconstructed courtroom to civic marketing and national ideology. The original essay says he omitted historians such as Richard Slotkin, but reviewers identify Slotkin and other major scholars as important foundations for the book. A fair critique can instead ask whether some theoretical claims receive enough comparative evidence or whether Fort Smith represents other sites fully. Case studies trade breadth for depth. Their value lies in revealing mechanisms that researchers can test elsewhere rather than proving that every Western attraction functions identically.

## Implications for Heritage Practice

The book calls for interpretation that places attractive stories within wider systems. A redesigned tour might connect Parker's court with Native sovereignty, name the executed, explain changing jurisdiction, discuss gender and labor at Miss Laura's, and present Bass Reeves without making him a symbol of uncomplicated federal justice. It could invite visitors to compare film memory with archival

evidence and disclose how the site itself developed. Community consultation should include Native nations and descendants rather than treating inclusion as an institutional gift. Commercial success and complexity are not necessarily enemies. Visitors can engage with conflict when interpretation provides clear narratives, human stakes, and opportunities to question how memory was made.

## Conclusion

*Mythic Frontiers* demonstrates that cultural heritage tourism does not simply preserve a frontier past waiting intact for display. Institutions create that past through objects, stories, architecture, marketing, and omission. Fort Smith's gallows, courtroom, brothel, marshals, and outlaws form a frontier complex that can legitimize white male privilege and obscure removal, colonial governance, racism, and sexism. Isaac Parker is part of the myth under examination, not Maher's principal ally against it. The book's greatest value is methodological: it teaches readers to ask how a site became persuasive, whose memory produces revenue, and what political work nostalgia performs in the present. Better heritage requires not less storytelling but more accountable storytelling.

## References

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