Mythic Frontiers by Daniel Maher

Posted on May 25, 2018

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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 transformed selected parts of frontier history into a marketable public identity. The book is not simply an argument that tourist stories are false. Maher studies how museums, historic sites, reconstructed spaces, civic branding, popular entertainment, and development strategies choose certain memories while making other histories less visible. His central concept, the "frontier complex," describes a recurring network of images involving heroic lawmen, dangerous outlaws, empty land, gallows, brothels, gunfights, individual opportunity, and the supposed arrival of civilization. These familiar motifs shape what visitors expect to find before they arrive, and institutions can then use that familiarity to organize heritage experiences and economic development (Maher, 2016). Fort Smith becomes a valuable case because its real history includes federal law, Indian Territory, Native sovereignty, racial hierarchy, commerce, punishment, and prostitution, while its tourist identity often condenses these conflicts into a more dramatic and consumable Western narrative.

The Frontier Complex and Public Memory

The frontier complex is powerful because its elements reinforce one another across media and public space. Western films make the heroic marshal familiar; a reconstructed gallows then appears to confirm that a lawless frontier required severe punishment; a tourism campaign can use the same imagery to promise visitors an authentic encounter with the past. Maher's argument is that repetition turns cultural familiarity into apparent historical authority. The problem is not that every gallows, courtroom, or outlaw story is fabricated. It is that the arrangement of these objects determines which political relationships become central. Federal authority may be presented as civilization arriving at a dangerous border while the prior sovereignty of Native nations becomes background context. Public memory is therefore produced not only by factual statements but by sequence, architecture, tone, visual emphasis, and omission. This insight makes the book valuable beyond Fort Smith. Heritage sites everywhere have limited space and must select what to display, but those selections become political when the same groups and conflicts repeatedly disappear from the story visitors are encouraged to remember.

Judge Parker, the Gallows, and Federal Power

Judge Isaac C. Parker occupies a central place in Fort Smith's tourism identity because popular memory has transformed him into the "Hanging Judge," a symbol of stern justice on the frontier. Maher complicates that image by separating Parker's personal legal views from the later mythology constructed around his court. Parker sometimes criticized mandatory capital punishment and understood himself as enforcing law rather than celebrating execution. Yet the federal court also operated within a political structure that extended United States authority into Indian Territory. The reconstructed gallows intensify this tension because they function simultaneously as a historical object, a tourist attraction, and a symbol of state violence. Visitors can experience the emotional thrill of proximity to execution while learning relatively little about jurisdiction, sovereignty, race, or the individuals who died there. Maher's analysis therefore asks what the gallows are made to mean. They can represent necessary order, punitive spectacle, colonial authority, or moral warning depending on interpretation. The object itself does not decide which story visitors receive; heritage institutions do.

Race, Gender, and the Limits of Heroic Inclusion

Maher also examines how apparently inclusive frontier stories can remain structurally narrow. Bass Reeves, a Black deputy U.S. marshal, deserves recognition because Black law officers were often erased from popular Western memory. Yet celebrating one exceptional figure can still leave the larger system unexamined if Reeves is presented mainly as proof that federal frontier authority was fully fair and inclusive. Individual achievement and structural criticism can coexist. The same issue appears in the interpretation of Miss Laura's Social Club, a restored brothel associated with Fort Smith's vice economy. Tourism may present prostitution through colorful stories of entertainment, entrepreneurship, or sexual freedom while minimizing poverty, coercion, violence, disease, stigma, and the limited choices available to many women. Gender analysis asks who controlled money, mobility, law, and reputation, while racial analysis asks who could occupy heroic roles and whose sovereignty or suffering became invisible. More inclusive heritage therefore requires more than adding diverse personalities to an unchanged frontier framework. It requires reconsidering the political system in which those individuals lived and worked.

Tourism, Deindustrialization, and Civic Branding

The book becomes especially distinctive when Maher connects historical interpretation with contemporary economic development. Cities that lose manufacturing or other stable employment often seek new growth through tourism, festivals, museums, branding, and cultural consumption. Frontier identity can appear attractive because audiences already understand its symbols and because historic buildings, courtrooms, gallows, and colorful personalities provide ready-made material for promotion. Maher does not argue that tourism is inherently illegitimate or that heritage

institutions should ignore economic survival. He asks who receives the benefits, who bears public costs, and what kind of history becomes easier to sell. A dramatic outlaw story may attract visitors more readily than a complicated discussion of treaties, Native governance, racial hierarchy, or labor. Economic pressure can therefore reward simplification. This creates a form of selective memory in which a community depends financially on the version of the past that is most recognizable. The challenge for heritage professionals is to create interpretation that remains compelling without converting historical violence or inequality into uncomplicated entertainment.

Myth, Meaning, and Responsible Heritage

One useful criticism of Maher is that myth should not be treated only as false information. Myths organize identity, emotion, ritual, and national meaning even when audiences know that reenactments or Western conventions are stylized. Correcting a date or disproving a legend may therefore have little effect if visitors remain attached to the deeper promises of frontier mythology: independence, order, masculinity, mobility, and renewal. Responsible heritage has to offer alternatives that are emotionally and aesthetically engaging as well as accurate. Fort Smith can interpret Parker's court alongside Native sovereignty, identify executed people by name, explain changing jurisdiction, present Bass Reeves without using him to legitimize every institution he served, and discuss prostitution through labor and gender rather than nostalgia. Community consultation with Native nations and descendants is especially important because inclusion should not depend on institutions speaking for communities whose histories were previously minimized. Better public history does not eliminate storytelling. It makes storytelling more accountable to evidence, power, and the people whose experiences created the past being marketed.

Conclusion

Mythic Frontiers demonstrates that cultural heritage tourism does not simply preserve a ready-made frontier past. It constructs public memory through choices about objects, architecture, characters, marketing, and omission. Fort Smith's gallows, courtroom, lawmen, outlaws, brothels, and civic promotions form a frontier complex that can make federal expansion appear natural while pushing Native sovereignty, colonial governance, race, gender, and labor toward the margins. Maher's strongest contribution is methodological because he teaches readers to ask how a site became persuasive, which memories generate economic value, and what political work nostalgia performs in the present (Maher, 2016). The book also shows why adding diverse individuals is not enough if the underlying story remains unchanged. Heritage becomes more responsible when institutions explain how authority was created, whose experiences were excluded, and how later generations transformed history into civic identity. Fort Smith remains an attractive tourism site, but its history becomes more meaningful when visitors are invited to understand conflict and contradiction rather than encounter only a polished mythology of the American frontier.

References

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