

# On the road to nowhere

## Notes on the new nomadism

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Looking to change my life, at the age of nineteen I decided to pack my belongings into a knapsack and hitchhike to California. Two miraculous rides carried me through prairies, deserts and mountains into Los Angeles to a friend's place at the edge of Hollywood. In those days, at least, California was considered the ultimate destination for every dream of freedom and opportunity, spiritual and economic.

In one sense, I was following a pattern: it is said that sixty percent of U.S. citizens either arrived here through the immigration center at Ellis Island in New York Harbor, or are descended from them. At least my mother's father seems to have followed that route. As with much of my background, I know little about him—a fairly common situation, evidence of the weightless character of life here.

We Americans are thought to be rootless escapees from every other continent—nomadic, free spirits who get ourselves going when the going gets tough—pulling up stakes and moving on to the next ridge or mountaintop, the next adventure. The country is billed as a Promised Land, a nation of immigrants who made good. (Usually overlooked by this idea are the peoples conquered by the invaders or forcibly dragged here in chains.)

Movement and migration, always a large part of the human experience, have taken on a dramatically different character since early modern times. The rapid pace, enormous dimensions, and universal permanence of movement have become characteristic of what is now a global urban-industrial civilization. The European invasion of America largely financed the emergence of capitalism. In the process, old cultures were entirely uprooted, indigenous peoples slaughtered and displaced, and whole regions pillaged.

It was the unsettling of Europe, Lewis Mumford once remarked, that brought about the settlement of America. Those who came here were themselves uprooted, detribalized people; settlement was itself vastly unsettling, what Frederick W. Turner, in his book *Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit Against the Wilderness*, has called “a spiritual story...of a civilization that had substituted history for myth as a way of understanding life.”

In the opening to his book, Turner recalls finding himself in the Black Hills of South Dakota, the sacred Paha Sapa of the Lakota Sioux (recently slated by the U.S. government as a “national sacrifice area” for mining, energy production and waste dumping). In a sudden flash he recognized how utterly estranged he was from the place, how it could never have the same deep meaning for him it has for the Lakota—not because of the amount of time they have been there but for the way they have lived there.

According to Turner, western civilization's turn from cyclic myth toward an obsession with linear time, and hence with geographic expansion to fulfill its history, underlies the frenzied outward movement of western civilization in general and American civilization in particular. The archaic myth of traditional peoples, which we might visualize as a circle, was transformed into a new mystique of history: a single line, an ever-receding horizon. This turn toward history banished the sacred from nature, Turner argues, making the Europeans “alienated sojourners in a spiritually barren world where the only outlet for the urge to life was the restless drive onward.” Such spiritual repression inevitably brought with it colossal levels of violence toward the world they encountered; the westward

wanderers' testimonies of "lavish and exhaustless" abundance, Turner writes, were also narratives "of waste, destruction, and frantic despoilation."

## **Pioneer ideology**

Ambivalence toward the land set the tragic conditions of the American experience. The sentimental idea of paradise—a lush, abundant garden—had its corollary in the image of an immense, threatening wilderness. Incapable of loving the land for what it was, the invaders had to "improve" it, pulverizing and reconstituting everything in their path. Alexis de Tocqueville likened their advance to a march, "turning the course of rivers, peopling solitudes, and subduing nature."

Tocqueville observed the tendency of early nineteenth century Americans to abandon a homestead before even finishing the roof. Typically, the settler was sustained by the idea that the frontier—a middle ground between corrupt civilization and chaotic wilderness—would bring redemption. The utopian urge for movement and change paradoxically reflected a profound desire to set down roots. But the market system at the core of North American ideology and identity, based as it is on abstract economic exchange, is inherently destabilizing and must inevitably undermine roots. Thus each frontier was eventually exhausted and abandoned by the same forces which caused it to be settled in the first place.

Official history says the devastation of the original lands and peoples was a necessary evil to bring about a vital civilization. So deeply ingrained is the mystique of manifest destiny that a 1992 Smithsonian exhibit on the quincentennial of Columbus, which merely referred to the incontrovertible fact of genocide and ecological devastation brought about by European conquest, was severely censured by politicians and pundits. The pioneer ideology—a New World version of holocaust denial—remains sacrosanct in many quarters. Every child grows up with it; Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone, and 1950s and '60s television cowboy shows such as "Bonanza" and "Gunsmoke" provided my generation's archetypal heroes, larger-than-life men bringing light to the darkness. We grew up on them, immersed ourselves in the blue light of their ideological shadow play. In this regard we were little different from nineteenth century people who read dime novels and followed frontier reports.

Commonly compared to Columbus and Balboa by the publicists responsible for creating his legend, Daniel Boone was the prototypical folk hero of the national drama. His characteristic misanthropy and urge to escape to the frontier became a familiar theme in American popular culture, from Huck Finn's meander down the Mississippi to Beat novelist Jack Kerouac's pilgrimage west in *On the Road*. Boone's statement that he left "domestic happiness...to wander through the wilderness of America in quest of the country of Kentucke" reveals the preeminently masculine aspect of the American nomadic mystique. In this story, men abandon "domestic happiness" (a woman's world), with its trivial charms and effete corruptions, for the Great Adventure. Throughout the Boone tale, a sexually charged ambivalence toward the land is visible—his yearning for the "virgin wilderness" and his terror of and loathing for the actual place and the people already living there.

In fact, as historian Richard Drinnon has commented, "under [Boone's] handsome yellow buckskins...beat the heart of a land company agent." In his indispensable study *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Empire-Building and Indian-Hating*, Drinnon reveals Boone as a land speculator and "professional empire builder" who "went in for body counts" of enemy dead after engaging in numerous punitive expeditions and raids against the locals. "We burnt them all to ashes," Boone writes in a typical account, representative of earlier and later wars against America's indigenous tribes and to future international wars as well. He and his cohorts "entirely destroyed their corn and other fruits, and every where spread a scene of desolation in the country," he reports almost laconically. Such desolation is the public secret underlying the Euroamerican pursuit of happiness.

## **Everyone must eat hamburgers**

If Boone and his ilk were the inventions of real estate promoters, no less was that hero of American heroes, the cowboy. This occupation drew little attention until the cowboy as heroic figure was concocted by Buffalo Bill Cody

for his Wild West Show at the end of the last century. By the time Cody was finished, the cowboy was synonymous with America; even the first celebrity cowboy, Cody's protegee Buck Taylor, had become an actor. Since then the actors, from John Wayne to Ronald Reagan, have come to supplant the reality; the myth firmly established, the Wild West has become a gargantuan, lucrative theme of the culture industry.

A cowboy hat and boots now afford masculine potency to their male wearer (and sexual allure to the occasional female), be it in Houston or New York City. Cowboy-inspired clothing is ubiquitous; upscale customers can even buy blue jeans said to have once been worn by "authentic" cowboys. The paraphernalia and symbols are employed not only to sell products like tobacco, alcohol and automobiles, but to sell the macho, individualistic and superficially independent mode of life that, as we are frequently reminded, makes the country great. There is now even a cowboy channel on national cable television for the devoted. Quips western singer Bobby Bare, "Today being a 'cowboy' is more of an attitude than an occupation." In former days the activities of cowboys represented just another get-rich-quick scheme of the settlers—a horde that first annihilated tens of millions of buffalo to starve out the natives before introducing livestock grazing. "Forage fever" paralleled gold fever, oil fever and other pecuniary thralls, with predictable results: grazing rivals, or surpasses, any other single factor in the ecological destruction of the American West. As Lynn Jacobs reports in his encyclopedic study on livestock grazing, *The Waste of the West*, the real national totem is not the eagle but the cow. One half of all U.S. land outside Alaska is grazed by livestock, mostly cattle, with another fifteen percent used as cropland to feed livestock. Half the water and forty percent of all plant food production go to livestock. The country, Jacobs argues, is a veritable cow factory.

In the American Eden, everyone must eat hamburgers; in the process, grasslands, brushlands, forests and deserts have been "cowburnt" and despoiled. According to U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates (which Jacobs considers very conservative), western rangelands are only about half as productive botanically as they were before the livestock invasion of the 1880s. Western rangeland is losing topsoil, mostly due to ranching, at a rate of five to perhaps twenty times as fast as it is being replaced.

Cattlemen had more than an environmental effect. After slaughtering the natives, they consolidated huge land holdings through theft and coercion. Since then, despite their miniscule numbers, they have dominated state and federal governments, fostering a "frontier justice" based on intimidation and violence—deputizing their cronies and imposing quick trials and quicker punishments, where the sheriff and the judge wear cowboy hats. (In the 1992 Texas gubernatorial race, Democratic and Republican candidates ran on who would execute more criminals more swiftly. The Republican, a son of George Bush, claimed the higher number and won. But cowboy justice seems more popular everywhere in the U.S. today.) The range war is in fact an apt replica of all aggressive capitalism, its fundamental war-of-all-against-all. The shoot-out and the hostile corporate buy-out are linked spiritually, as Turner might say, certainly symbolically, frequently right down to the western clothing worn by both sets of protagonists. Of course, the cattle barons are now often multinationals or giant eastern insurance companies. Despite the myth's images of neighborliness, community in the West is mostly an aggregate, dominated by the powerful, of atomized individuals, "alienated sojourners" relentlessly whipping and stripping the countryside to scrape off a profit. After being pushed onto reservations and seeing the land suffer under the onslaught of the whites, the Navajos believed their region to be literally bewitched. Anyone who has seen the hysteria on the floor of the Commodities Exchange, or its result on the landscape, might agree.

The romance of the horizon is a mirage concealing the boom-bust cycle and subsequent dust-bowls of the market. Restless and unsentimental, capital must constantly abandon yesterday's faded paradise to conquer the next or face collapse. The frontier is always somewhere else. Indeed, today's pilgrim may be fleeing yesterday's settlement—perhaps a town like Love Canal, New York, abandoned because of industrial contamination, or some fishing village in Alaska where oil washed up from the Exxon Valdez. Formerly the haven from a heartless world and the site of redemption, the American home, with its toxic leachate seeping through the basement wall, has itself become a kind of horrible condition to escape. In the beginning, the Indians were driven out with the justification that being nomadic, they could lay no claim to the land they occupied. But what came after was fragmentation, not stability, and a contempt for the land still visible in ugly Alaska frontier towns, the denuded industrial landscapes of the Rust Belt, and rural lands everywhere obliterated for "development."

## Cowboys and astronauts

Looking honestly at the movements of indigenous nomadic peoples, we would mostly see a peregrination based on a profound awareness of and ability to live with the land rather than against it. Traditional nomads have a spiritual relationship with the land, moving in a kind of sacred circle, or perhaps in an ellipse; in their stories and their migrations they continually return to the source and center of the world.

In contrast, the modern “nomad” moves along a line, following a receding horizon, wrecking and abandoning along the way, never at home, always scheming the next move across shifting, breaking ice. Or maybe the movement is a circle, but it now goes from nowhere to nowhere, around and around like the subway line, or the circulation of money. One thinks of Tocqueville’s prescient comment that in America life was “always changing, but it is monotonous, because all these changes are alike.” It may be the singular genius of the country of my birth to turn every unique place into the same monotonous Place.

The grid plan of early American towns was designed to facilitate land transactions. Now the grid is inescapable, and everywhere one encounters the same sterile housing development, strip mall, power line, “industrial park” or cleared hillside (perhaps stripped to pay off junk bonds, like many of Northern California’s redwoods).

The grid and the car go together; if the old household had to be flattened by new expressway construction, the road would lead to “a new beginning,” first to the suburbs and the post-war tract home, like the one in which I grew up, and more recently to the semi-rural walled pseudo-villages with country-sounding names harkening to whispering pines or tall oaks long vanished into the shredder. “The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose,” wrote Walt Whitman; a plastic bag from a Detroit auto parts store asserts, “It’s not your car, it’s your freedom.” Early in our history the romance of the landscape shifted to the machine. The railroad and telegraph were destined to “annihilate space and time,” according to one observer. As the physical setting was indeed annihilated, wild nature lost its power to dominate the imagination (except increasingly as the site for automobile advertising), and only the machine remains. Today’s post-modern nomad channel surfs or wanders in cyberspace, no longer worrying about the world outside or even believing it exists. Consumerism delivers paradise, and the miracles of abundance no longer come from loamy earth but from genetic engineering, space flight and the media. The land is now so displaced that the phantasms of bubble cities and an entirely engineered environment, like the Biosphere II experiment in Arizona, are received with enthusiasm and even hope.

The cowboy is now an astronaut, futures trader or cyberpunk; after porno-, space- and virtual reality-cowboys, it’s hard to believe anyone pays him any attention. Yet the frontier idea still elicits loyalty, especially in the high tech mid-sized towns and rural areas of the West and the Sun Belt, where nationalistic, conservative, fundamentalist Christian forces are strongest. There, the old myths have found new vigor in a weird but potent mix of frontier and New Age values. And where the middle class is no longer fascinated by the pioneer, it chases Indian shadows in New Age healing rituals fashioned from purloined fragments of native religion. During the Persian Gulf War millions of Americans were drawn to the hugely successful film *Dances With Wolves*, a white man’s romance about living among the Lakota, while the contemporary cavalry incinerated more recently demonized “savages” in the Mideast.

In his 1994 memoir of the Vietnam War, *In Pharaoh’s Army*, Tobias Wolff relates how, determined to watch the 1967 “Bonanza” Thanksgiving special in style, he risked getting killed and perpetrated mayhem on Vietnamese civilians along the road in order to drive to a distant U.S. base to find a big screen television. In their refusal to come to terms with the place, he writes, the Americans at the base “had created a profound, intractable bog” smelling of roast turkey and overflowing latrines. In Vietnam, Wolff “saw something that wasn’t allowed for in our national myth—our capacity for collective despair.” He wonders afterward, “Where were we, really?” (The question has been asked ever since Europeans first stumbled up on a Caribbean beach.) The Bonanza special turned out to be, as always, “a story of redemption—man’s innate goodness brought to flower by a strong dose of opportunity, hard work, and majestic landscape.” Like the American continent, Indochina paid a high price for the acting out of this story. But Wolff’s question remains unanswered. We are too busy moving on.

## We remain foreigners

As for moving on, I didn't last in California, and after a year or so returned to Detroit. But my family has been scattered to the winds, so it should not be any surprise that I began penning this essay on an airplane headed west to the Hawaiian island of Maui to visit my mother, who moved there twenty-five years ago to work, and then stayed. We're nomads, too.

Just during the last quarter century in which I have visited it, Hawaii has provided a stunning lesson in the effects of our peculiar nomadism. A small and exquisitely beautiful place stolen from its original inhabitants, it continues to undergo changes both rapid and horrendous. Development of every sort—military, industrial and commercial—is turning it into part Southern California, part Detroit. As I drove from the airport past Kahana Pond this time, I noticed the completion of a new development encroaching on a bird sanctuary there—a huge K-Mart discount store. (K-Mart headquarters in suburban Detroit had just laid off thirteen hundred workers.) There, by the edge of a new asphalt parking lot, stood a beautiful white egret—another immigrant—poking through debris for food, looking like a homeless person at a trash bin. They “were careless people,” Fitzgerald's protagonist Nick Carraway concludes about the people he meets in *The Great Gatsby*. “They smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.” I know the defiled wilderness has also become a common cultural motif. In certain post-modern circles, being “on the road to nowhere,” as the Talking Heads song goes, is even counted as a blessing, however precarious. But our wandering comes at a great price—to egrets and to people. Throughout it all, we remain foreigners—in America and everywhere else.

It's true we can't go back to sacred circles long unraveled. We're already torn from our roots, we're made of myriad places. But space and time have not yet been altogether annihilated; it still may be possible to find out where we've been, where we really are, to recognize the integrity of the place and what it has lived. It's time to start cleaning up our mess, to “grasp rock and soil,” as the Lakota writer Luther Standing Bear put it. It's time to come home.

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