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# *RESTLESS IN AMERICA (AND BEYOND): EXPANDING SPACE AND TIME FRONTIERS*

"Ah, who shall soothe these feverish children?
Who justify these restless explorations?"
—Walt Whitman, "Passage to India"

***Keywords***: *frontier, insomnia, nighttime, restlessness, space, technology, time*
**Abstract:** *The so-called "spatialization of time in American language and culture" (Avadanei 24) is deeply rooted in America's experience of geographical and social mobility. In the terms used by the Canadian scholar Harold A. Innis, who believes that each society shares a "bias" toward time or space, America has been in many ways a spatially biased society tending toward "extension" (expansion, imperialism, the future), as opposed to a temporally biased one that tends toward "duration" (solidity, permanence, the past). Therefore, in my paper, I am particularly interested in mapping the intersection of American cultural sites with porous, yet persistent spatial and temporal boundaries, such as the wilderness and the frontier experience, the nocturnal underworld of cities and the so-called "night-time frontier," the "global village" and "time-space compression," and finally, cyberspace, nowadays regarded as the new frontier, and night-time expansion. Drawing on the insights of historians and sociologists, as well as on the imaginative creations of writers and filmmakers, I highlight not so much the dark, indeed transgressive energies associated with these borderlands, as America's characteristic restlessness, its constant drive for change, (self-)exploration, and expansion, both outward and inward.*

My paper traces significant developments in American civilization that reveal the complexity of Americans' relation to both time and space, as cultural categories relevant for identity formation. If, as Foucault wrote in "Of Other Spaces" (1967), the "great obsession of the nineteenth century" was with history and its "themes of development and of suspension, of crisis, and cycle," the present epoch has indeed been "above all the epoch of space," of "simultaneity," of "juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed." From its very beginning, however, American history has been spread out in space, confronting various frontiers as a "permanent goal and challenge" (Avadanei 59). The so-called "spatialization of time in American language and culture" (Avadanei 24) is deeply rooted in America's experience of geographical and social mobility.[1] In the terms used by the Canadian scholar Harold A. Innis, who believes that each society shares a "bias" toward time or space, America has been in many ways a spatially biased society tending toward "extension" (expansion, imperialism, the future), as opposed to a temporally biased one that tends toward "duration" (solidity, permanence, the past).[2] Therefore, in what follows, I am particularly interested in mapping the intersection of American cultural

[1]According to the entry on "Consciousness of Time" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* the spatial notion of time is an error attributed to the fact that "our temporal language is riddled with spatial metaphors. This is because temporal relations are formally analogous to spatial relations … What we perceive and sense are things changing. Time is a nonspatial order in which things change" (qtd. in Woodsmall).
[2] In *The Bias of Communication* (1951), Innis charts the history of communication mediums and their respective biases toward either temporal or spatial values. As Donato Totaro shows, Innis' conceptualization of the time/space bias is indebted to Henri Bergson, who defined space primarily through extensity, and real time through duration.

sites with porous, yet persistent spatial and temporal boundaries, such as the wilderness and the frontier experience, the nocturnal underworld of cities and the so-called "night-time frontier," the "global village" and "time-space compression," and finally, cyberspace, nowadays regarded as the new frontier, and night-time expansion. Drawing on the insights of historians and sociologists, as well as on the imaginative creations of writers and filmmakers, I highlight not so much the dark, indeed transgressive energies associated with these borderlands, as America's characteristic restlessness, its constant drive for change, (self-) exploration, and expansion, both outward and inward.

Restlessness has been embedded in the nation's DNA since its very conception, following the Pilgrims' transatlantic journey, away from the Old World with its confining space and oppressive past. Soon, "the new race of men," as Crevecoeur dubbed the Americans, set out on a transcontinental journey, across all kinds of barriers (geographical, social, and spiritual), and the stage theory of civilization, which explained the development of American society from the frontier to the seacoast, reinforced the role played by the new environmental forces in shaping the American character: "the hunter and the fur trader who pushed into the Indian country were followed by the cattle raiser and he by the pioneer farmer" (Turner 19-20). Invoking this theory and anticipating Whitman's hopeful vision of America in "Passage to India," Crevecoeur observed that "Americans are the western pilgrims who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigor, and industry which began long since in the East" (120). Whitman, too, saw the wonders of transportation and communication catalogued in "Passage to India" as the culmination of Western civilization, returning the latter to its point of origin in the Orient and pointing towards an enlightened future. Thus, echoing Roger Williams' metaphor of the New World as a ship at sea, the poet calls on his "brave soul" to "Sail forth—steer for the deep waters only," "For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go, / And we will risk the ship, ourselves, and all." Such was the imperial dream fueled by the vastness of the landscape, of a still vaster America, no longer confined between two oceans.

Earlier in the 19th century, while touring the country, the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville was struck by the lack of fixity in American life and the Americans' "restlessness in the midst of abundance." In the United States, he remarked, a man's "changeable longings" compel him to move from place to place, and if at the end of a year of unremitting labor he finds he has a few days' vacation, his eager curiosity whirls him over the vast extent of the United States, and he will travel fifteen hundred miles in a few days to shake off his happiness. Death at length overtakes him, but it is before he is weary of his bootless chase of that complete felicity which forever escapes him.

Restlessness, he thought, was "a source of both energy and misery. One could in America become anything by work, yet success seemed only to aggravate the ache of want."

Work and wakefulness were central to the Puritan ethic, whose legacy is still felt in our 24/7 world. The Puritans replaced the "irregular calendar of saints' days" with "the clocklike rhythm of the weekly Sabbath, when men were to be as tireless and unbending in their rest as they had been during the week at their labors" (Rodgers 9). At the same time, they warned against "the dangers of idleness," in keeping with the Calvinist understanding that each moment must be "accounted for in heaven" (100). Hence "the paradox of *striving at the task of restfulness*" that has been governing many attempts to simplify lives in modern times (Summers-Bremner 100, italics mine). Equally paradoxical, while our ability to measure time and manipulate our internal rhythms has improved over the ages, "mechanical aids," as Thoreau called them, like watches, clocks and calendars, have become our "dictators." As early as 1881, the New York doctor George Miller Beard partly blamed the tyranny of clocks and watches for the excessive stimulation that made modern urbanites unable to switch off (Summers-Bremner 123). In his turn, Lewis Mumford considers the clock, and not the steam-engine, to be "the key-machine of the modern industrial age" (14). Moreover, in addition to stimulating the nighttime entertainment industry, the introduction of artificial lighting also permitted multiple-shift factory operations on a broad scale, leading Karl Marx to declare night work as a new mode of exploitation.

To be sure, the relentless march of civilization, put into motion by urbanization and industrialism, changed time consciousness to match the modern belief in "infinite" progress and social and moral

betterment. Nevertheless, Eluned Summers-Bremer has pointed out that this Western privileging of a forward-looking present involved "not only the consigning of the past to darkness but also a disavowal of the dark processes of modernity," including slavery, debt, and anxiety (86). As the present moment "vanishes perpetually into the future of goals, outcomes, and profits," the "darkness" that hovers at the edges, or in the background of modernity, is materialized in insomnia, the absence of sleep and of the oblivion that sleep brings.[3]

Insomnia disrupts not only the artificial order that defines the daylight world of industrial capitalism, but one's inner world as well. The Romantics, whether British or American, embraced night as the time most suited for the "eternal awakeness," the merging with a kind of "oceanic consciousness" they simultaneously desired and dreaded.[4] By the same token, the wilderness offered solitude and tranquility to the world-weary soul, be that of the frontiersman or of the Romantic hero. Frontier literature, starting with John Filson's life of Daniel Boone and continuing with James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking novels, richly illustrates, or illuminates the dark romance of American expansionism by capturing the twofold appeal of the wilderness: on the one hand, this is seen as beautiful, friendly, and capable of delighting and comforting the beholder; on the other, it is sublime, mysterious and threatening, much like nighttime. Yet another dark facet of modernity emerges from Edgar Allan Poe's stories of madness and terror that center on insomniacs like Roderick Usher or the narrator in "The Man of the Crowd," as well as from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story of a female insomniac struggling to break from her physical and psychological imprisonment in "The Yellow Wallpaper."

The threshold states dramatized in these latter texts show a resurgence of interest in the Gothic, a genre "fascinated by the porousness of borders and the conflicts and contradictions that societies express, and attempt to suppress, by erecting them" (Summers-Bremner 94). It is therefore no accident that the revival of the Gothic was coextensive with the closing of the western frontier. In 1893, three years after the Census Bureau had made it clear that the vast reservoir of wilderness had been depleted, Frederick Jackson Turner famously observed that, "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 American character" (200). More than a century later, the presidential campaign of 2008, pitting a "maverick hero" like John McCain against the "new frontierman" Barack Obama, has been interepreted as a testament to the power of the frontier myth that still grips American politicians and intellectuals due to the "exciting possibilities" the myth suggests, namely, "the absence of confining histories, cultures, or mores, combined with the limitless American landscape" (John Tirman).

The very notion of "frontier" has been constantly redefined since the closure of the continental frontier. In an essay published for the *American Sociological Review* (1978), Murray Melbin puts forth an interesting thesis on "the changeover from space to time as the realm of human migration in the United States" (3). More specifically, he argues that while the settlement of the West was coming to an end, night was becoming the new frontier.[5] In support of his argument, Melbin highlights the similarities between life in the U.S. West in the middle of the nineteenth century and the present-day nighttime. Thus, since the rapid expansion into the dark hours has been taking place mostly in urban areas, the culture of the contemporary urban nighttime is shown "to reveal the same patterns and moods found in former land

[3] "At its simplest, the present moment as outcome of the past can be seen as the day's work that physically depends upon a good night's sleep before it can have any meaning as regards future profits" (99). Herein lies capitalism's "Gothic genius," which, in the first volume of *Capital* (1867), Karl Marx compared to that of Dracula: "Capitalism is Gothic because it is only able to calculate profits by raiding future sleep time—like Dracula raiding the bodies of sleeping women—as a surplus it claims as owed, but without the benefit of which it could never have got started in the first place (Summers-Bremer 99).

[4] After all, sleep remains "the one time when we are not separated from what lies beyond consciousness *by* consciousness" (Summers-Bremer 90).

[5] "Since people may exploit a niche by distributing themselves and their activities over more hours of the day just as they do by dispersing in space, a frontier could occur in the time dimension too" (Melbin).

frontiers." Just as there was a succession of phases in colonizing the Great West, so there has also been a succession of phases in settling the nighttime, each "fill[ing] the night more densely than before and us[ing] those hours in a different way":

> First came isolated wanderers on the streets; then groups involved in production activities, the graveyard-shift workers. Still later those involved in consumption activities arrived, the patrons of all-night restaurants and bars, and the gamblers who now cluster regularly by midnight at the gaming table in resorts. (Melbin 6)

At the frontier, the wilderness met "civilization," and as a result of this encounter, elements of both cultures and lifestyles merged into a complex, open, and mobile society. Crevecoeur was confident that, as the frontier was moving west, the "wild" character of its inhabitants was always in the process of being "tamed": "Governments," he observed, "can do nothing in so extensive a country; better it should wink at these irregularities," especially idleness, "than that it should use means inconsistent with its usual mildness. Time will efface those stains: in proportion as the great body of population approaches them they will reform and become polished and subordinate" (125). At the same time, the push westward entailed a move away from the national center of lawmaking, which often meant that "frontiersmen not only enforced their own law, [but] they chose which laws should be enforced and which should be ignored" (Hollon qtd. in Melbin 10).

Both the western frontier and the nighttime can then be described as sites of deviance and violence, isolation and individualism. The freedom they afford certainly has its thrills, but also dangers. "It is plausible that western desperados and nighttime muggers would have similar outlooks. Both believe there is less exposure, which improves their chances for succeeding at the risks they take." [6] However, like the "wildness" of the former West, the patterns of aggression at night are "selective and localized," "concentrated in certain hours in certain places" (Melbin 11).

The transgressive energies of frontier mythology, urban culture, and nighttime activity converge in one of the landmark counterculture films, fittingly titled "Midnight Cowboy" (1969). Like Jack Kerouac and the Beats, Joe Buck leaves his home (in Texas) and literally takes to the road, wanting to forge his own destiny. The frontier he chooses to conquer is not the desolate West but rather the urban jungle of New York City where, dressed as a cowboy, he sets out to become a male prostitute. Neither approving nor condemning homosexuality, the film merely highlights it as an alternative, albeit darker lifestyle woven into the colorful texture of the city.

Worth considering is also the uniqueness of the night frontier, as opposed to the geographical one: for one thing, as Melbin put it, "Looking westward, pioneers saw no end to the possibilities for growth, but we know that expansion into the night can only go as far as the dawn" (19). Moreover, whereas "the land frontier held promise of unlimited opportunity" for miners, gold-seekers, and farmers who ventured there, night is "colonized" by individuals performing "unskilled, menial, and dirty tasks," indeed "dead-end jobs"; these individuals, most of them minorities and immigrants, make up the ever "expanding margin of society" that Melbin calls a *time ghetto.* I would add that, just as "ultimate control in 24-hour organizations remains with top management in the daytime," so this type of privilege has its parallel in suburban life, as people live outside the cities while relying on them to provide jobs, trade, and industry. Finally, Melbin urges us to "consider the possibilities of an era in which unremitting activity is even more commonplace." "What will happen when saturation occurs?" he asks. "Time," he correctly maintains, "is unstretchable; we cannot do with it as we did with land by building up toward the sky and digging into the ground. Time is unstorable; we cannot save the unused hours every night for future need" (20).

[6] Like some of the early Western settlers, people active after dark tend to be those avoiding social constraints and perhaps persecution by daytime society. Mormons and Hutterites both made their ways westward to avoid harassment from others. Two groups usually linked with the nighttime are homosexuals and prostitutes. The latter have a union for which they appropriately adopted the name of a creature renowned in the U.S. West for howling at night: the coyote, an acronym for "Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics."

Intensified by radio, television broadcasting, mobile communication, and the Internet, the large-scale migration of wakeful activity has, over the last three decades, continued to spread all over the world. Not only have the new media and computer technologies increased the pace and scope of wakefulness at all hours, but in so doing they have remapped the boundaries of our world, and even of what we think of as "home." For William Gibson, whose 1984 novel, *Neuromancer* remains one of the most influential fictional explorations of postmodern cyberspace, the new frontier "offers us the opportunity to waste time, to wander aimlessly, to daydream about the countless other lives, the other people, on the far sides of however many monitors in that postgeographical meta-country we increasingly call home." David Harvey has described this post-geographical, post-industrial moment, when the global exchange of information takes the place of the production of goods, as the age of "time-space compression"; as he explains,

> spaces of very different worlds seem to collapse upon each other, much as the world's commodities are assembled in the supermarket and all manner of sub-cultures get juxtaposed in the contemporary city. Disruptive spatiality triumphs over the coherence of perspective and narrative in postmodern fiction, in exactly the same way that imported beers coexist with local brews, local employment collapses under the weight of foreign competition, and all the divergent spaces of the world are assembled *nightly* as a collage of images upon the television screen. (Harvey 302; italics mine).

A case in point is an experiment that Mark Edmundson once tried in a class he was teaching on English and American Romanticism. They had been studying Thoreau and discussing his rather "sour" reflections on the uses of technology for communication. "We are in great haste," he famously said, "to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate." Edmundson asked his students: "How many places were you simultaneously yesterday — at the most?" "Suppose," he ventured,

> you were chatting on your cellphone, partially watching a movie in one corner of the computer screen, instant messaging with three people (a modest number), and glancing occasionally at the text for some other course than ours . . . and then, also, tossing the occasional word to your roommate? Well, that would be seven, seven places at once.

Edmundson concludes that "anyone who is in seven places at once is not anywhere in particular — not present, not here now. Be everywhere now — that's what the current technology invites, and that's what my students aspire to do." "Enemies of closure," they "live to multiply possibilities," striving to "keep their options open" and seize the day, or, indeed, the moment, for their actual exchanges are reduced to a "succession of instants" (Baudrillard 149). As well as leading to information being transmitted at speeds too fast for people to properly digest, such an acutely mechanized existence reflects a time consciousness that exalts the present and values "the transitory, the elusive and the ephemeral" (Habermas 3) at the expense of the past.

Edmundson's students are not alone in this geography of nowhere, as restlessness, a typical American trait, has itself gone global, along with many other familiarities of Western culture, shaping the transnational model of identity. The former Western pilgrim is now the globe-trotter, web-surfer, jet-setter, or, as Pico Iyer describes himself, the "transit-lounger"—part of the "transcontinental tribe of wanderers," who have grown up with increased freedom of mobility in a world made smaller by globalization. The problem, recognized by both Iyer and Edmundson, is that constant mobility precludes any affiliation to place or culture, and that restlessness can signal rootlessness; as Iyer rather sadly admits, "nothing is strange to us and nowhere is foreign." In his turn, Edmundson, while admiring his students' feverish "hunger for life," would still prefer them to heed Thoreau's advice—simplify, slow down, and live deliberately—if only for a while. Why? Because, as Thoreau reminds us in *Walden*, there is more to life than conducting business, talking through a telegraph, riding thirty miles an hour, and building railroads (116). Only when we are "unhurried and wise," do we become truly conscious of time's flow—of "petty fears and petty pleasures" that are transient— as well as of "great and worthy things" that

endure: “Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars” (Thoreau 119).

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