

“Ambivalent Technologies” of American Citizenship

Catherine Gouge



“The history of America is the history of a people who have stepped beyond the lines that have been drawn for them.”

— Hillary Clinton, at a White House Celebration for the 1999 U.S. Women’s World Cup Win

“It is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the *beyond*.”

— Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (1994)

In March 2007, the town of Anderson, Alaska advertised free land for those willing to build on the lot within two years. The website for the land give-away appealed to escapist desires to flee what it implicitly identified as the over-crowded, crime-ridden, expensive, already-settled U.S. territories: “Are you tired of the hustle and bustle of the Lower 48, crime, poor schools, and high cost of living? Make your new home in the Last Frontier!” And by 22 March 2007, the town had received 54 applications for the “free land” and awarded lots to the first 26 applicants. This “Last Frontier” is perhaps one of

the most recent, but there have been many so-called American “final frontiers” identified since the frontier in the American West was declared officially closed by the Census Bureau in 1890. Most of these, however, have not been physical places. Presidents Herbert Hoover in 1932 and John F. Kennedy in 1960 each used the rhetoric of the frontier in an attempt to motivate the American public to fight socio-economic crises facing the nation. In 1988, the cover of *Discover* magazine identified as a “final frontier” an exciting new technological innovation: Velcro. Cyberspace, outer space,¹ using race as a marketing strategy,² Microsoft’s voice recognition software,³ and even human souls open to religious proselytizing⁴ have all been proclaimed to be “final frontiers” by American publications and organizations. I do not mean to suggest that there are no references to or attempts to identify “final frontiers” outside of the United States. However, because American national identity has been said by many American historians and politicians to depend upon American citizens’ interaction with “frontiers,” the proliferation of so-called final frontiers to motivate the American public begs an examination of what cultural logic or structure of power identifying such frontiers works to support. If American national identity continues to be associated by Americans with an ever-expanding list of “final frontiers,” what can the logic and values behind such identifications tell us about structures of power in American culture and the constitution of allegedly “American” subjectivities?

¹ There have been many “final” frontiers identified in outer space: the Moon, Mars, all of outer space. One of the newest identified by NASA is a specific location that their Voyager 1 spacecraft has recently reached at the edge of the “Sun’s influence.” Their website explains that the “Voyager 1 spacecraft has entered the solar system’s final frontier, a vast, turbulent expanse where the Sun’s influence ends and the solar wind crashes into the thin gas between stars.

(http://www.nasa.gov/vision/universe/solarsystem/voyager_agu.html).

² The website “Marketing Popular Culture” contains a podcast that explains that the “NYC [New York City] Human Rights Commission issued a report on the lack of diversity within the advertising industry in 1978” which, 30 years later the podcast claims, has yet to be addressed. Diversity in advertising is, thus, identified by the podcaster as the “final frontier”

(http://www.marketingpopculture.com/the_spark/2006/09/race_the_final_.html).

³ The title of a March 2007 article in eWeek, asks, “Microsoft and Speech Recognition: The Final Frontier?” and explains Microsoft will acquire Tellme Networks, a privately owned communications company. Because, as the article reports, “the number of companies that serve the voice recognition-based search market is shrinking this move will enable them to expand their empire and make a great deal of money (<http://www.eweek.com/article2/0,1895,2103678,00.asp>).

⁴ The Final Frontiers Foundation, Inc. is a U.S.-based religious organization whose purpose, as their website describes, “is to effectively take the Gospel to the more than 3 billion souls who have never before heard” (<http://www.finalfrontiers.org>).

Many contemporary frontier narratives circulating in American cultural discourse that suggest that we must, as American citizens, keep exploring, conquering, buying, developing, and, thus, progressing — moving literally or figuratively beyond. New is better, according to this logic, and going is always good. As Hilary Clinton's 1999 address to the women's national soccer team illustrates, even winning a World Cup is configured as a frontierist movement which has a legacy in American history of others "who have stepped beyond." Indeed, the centrality of this American cultural logic of the frontier, or "frontierism," to American national identity has sometimes been represented as so powerful that frontier-seeking is depicted as an inherent, inevitable, and desirable national condition.

During his acceptance speech at the 1960 Democratic National Convention, John F. Kennedy declared,

We stand on the edge of a New Frontier — the frontier of the 1960s — a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils — a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats. The New Frontier is here whether we seek it or not. Beyond are uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus . . . [which] demand invention, imagination, decision. I am asking you to be pioneers on the New Frontier.

As with other such proclamations which are similarly strategic, Kennedy constructs a frontierist rhetorical frame for issues he knew his contemporaries were concerned about: the space race, war, prejudice, and poverty. The "New Frontier" is, according to Kennedy, defined by such issues and exploring them is posed as a challenge to the public as a way of motivating them to fulfill their duties as American citizens. This strategic deployment of this country's investment in frontier ventures would have made it difficult for listeners to deny Kennedy's call and still claim to be patriotic, nationalistic Americans. The implicit equation⁵ in Kennedy's speech, in other words, was not only

⁵ Kenneth Burke's *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950) discusses the rhetorical function of "associational clusters" can which can operate as a set of "implicit equations" to reinforce the interrelationships among the terms (20).

that the American public could choose to be defined by such twentieth-century frontier efforts but that the public would fail to be American if they did not choose to participate — to be, ideologically, subjects of the so-called New Frontier.

More than half a century before Kennedy's speech, Frederick Jackson Turner had published his now famous treatise on the official end to the first “American” frontier by the Census Bureau in 1890. In this treatise, Turner identified a connection between the North American frontier west and American national identity. In fact, he went so far as to assert that it is

to the frontier that the American intellect shows its striking characteristic. That coarseness of strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but power to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom — these are the traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. (37)

Like Frederick Jackson Turner, Kennedy pools “invention,” “imagination,” and “decision” as primary characteristics of a pioneering American spirit. Kennedy goes so far as to locate the ability of Americans to develop intellectual traits, like invention and imagination, in our engagement with an allegedly open, unpopulated frontier space. According to Turner, the value of the land in the American frontier West had been that the promise of it made “American” mean something as an identity category. Perhaps one of the most important differences between Kennedy’s and Turner’s rhetorical frames is that, unlike Turner, Kennedy dislocates the frontier from the originary⁶ frontier West, and, thus, from a physical place. Turner had lamented the fact that “never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves,” but has also predicted that the “American energy will

⁶ Because the frontier was always already in so many ways an imaginary space, the term “originary” is used to identify the combination of imaginary and real contributions to our American cultural memory of the frontier prior to 1890.

continually demand a wider field for its exercise" (37). "The frontier has gone," Turner concluded, "and with its going has closed the first period of American history" (38).

Turner's conclusion indeed identified a key turning point in the performance and rhetoric of national identity and nation-building in American history. The century following Turner's address witnessed a shift from Americans primarily pursuing frontier *places* on the North American continent to a wide-spread naming of and engaging with figurative frontier *spaces* as well (like cyberspace and sociopolitical and intellectual activities). Attesting to the popularity of Turner's belief that our interaction with the originary frontier is the bedrock of American exceptionalism, many in the twentieth century were quite outspoken, if not defensive, about the allegedly ridiculous "closed-frontier argument." For example, in response to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's pronouncements about the closing of the frontier in his "Commonwealth Club" speech of 1932, Herbert Hoover identified Democrats' closed-frontier "explanations for the depression and their big-government-centered plans to alleviate it as a lack of faith in capitalism and in America itself" (qtd. in Wrobel 136). The American frontier place in the West might have been said not to exist any longer by the 1890 Census, but American frontier spaces abound: "there are vast continents awaiting us of thought, of research, of discovery, of industry, of human relations, potentially more prolific of human comfort than even the Boundless West" (Hoover, qtd. in Wrobel 136). Like many others in the years to follow, Hoover and Kennedy invoke an imaginary frontier, one that is explicitly conceptual.

I. Ambivalent, Frontierist Technologies and American National Identity

The technologies of influence which operate in the frontierist cultural logic evident in Turner and Kennedy and are still prevalent in twenty-first century American culture are, indeed, ambivalent technologies. Referring both to objects and concepts which "can be used in various ways depending in part on the social conditions in which they are constructed and reconstructed in use," Johndan Johnson-Eilola emphasizes the "multiplicity" and "contingency" of the influence of ambivalent technologies. Mobilizing conceptions of space as fundamental to ideas of American national identity in

order to make an argument for “selling” things (ideas and objects) has become commonplace — especially in, though certainly not limited to, popular techno-science texts⁷ and political discourse. Perhaps because American culture is still motivated by the control of spaces and bodily movement in those spaces, connecting American national identity to frontierist desires works particularly well in the contemporary American culture and intervenes in definitions of citizenship in particularly powerful and distinctly spatial ways.⁸

Postmodern conceptions of the fundamental structure of space — as always changing and constant only in its instability — resonate with the structures of post-originary frontier spaces.⁹ Recognizing that “the anxiety of our era has fundamentally to do with space” (23)¹⁰ and arguing for a shift in the ways that we think about and imagine space, Michel Foucault has written that we must treat space as dynamic, mobile, and unstable rather than “dead” or “fixed.” To think of space in this way, he argues, is

to trace forms of implantation, delimitation and demarcation of objects
 . . . the organization of domains mean[s] the throwing into relief of
 processes — historical ones, needless to say, of power. (21)

Similarly asserting that space is dynamic, Michel de Certeau writes that

space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it. . . . In contradistinction to the place, it has thus none of the univocity or stability of a “proper.” In short space is a practiced place. (117)

⁷ Notable in the genre such texts are Robert Zubrin's books *The Case for Mars* (1996) and *Entering Space* (1999).

⁸ Johnson-Eilola also argues in *Nostalgic Angels* that the “commodity space and the construction space of hypertext rely on the increasingly common idea that knowledge is spatial” (27).

⁹ I use the term “post-originary” here to refer to the period of American history following the closing of the “originary” frontier in 1890 by the Census Bureau.

¹⁰ “Of Other Spaces.” For other particularly lucid, extended discussions of postmodern theories of space, see David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990) and *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*; Sue-Ellen Case's *The Domain-Matrix: Performing Lesbian at the End of Print Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996); Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (1989).

This distinction between space and place resonates with Foucault's insistence that space not be "treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile." And indeed, both figurative and physical frontiers rehearse this spatial mobility and reveal a great deal about the structures of power at work in American culture.

The various economic, social, political structures of power that determine the rhetorical boundaries of frontierist spaces at different historical moments are defined by familiar capitalist structures of power. While the purpose remains the same, the location of frontierist spaces depends on the demands of the marketplace. If a place, product, or new technology is considered to have market potential, in other words, it is called a frontier and the public is invited to "explore" and "settle" it by investing resources like time and money. The frontier spirit is accordingly defined as distinctly entrepreneurial, and "adventure" is redefined as the willingness to invest capital.

Frontierist spaces are, in this way, "practiced places" — delimited as much by physical as imaginative presence "there"; and the "there" there is structured by a socioeconomic and political "energy that is deployed" (Lefebvre 13). In particular, since the advent of the space race, frontierist rhetoric has been deployed in the service of a distinctly consumerist frontier spirit that the American public can be involved in through their purchasing power. Two of the products sold to the American public in this way were Tang and Teflon. Both were invented to be used in space and both were positioned as consumer products that the American public could buy to be a part of the space race. The resulting escalation of patriotic consumerism such marketing strategies have facilitated has resulted in a national identity predicated on a logic of constant up-grades. Often, the specific energy is directed toward a superficially new means to an imagined end of "supreme plenitude" (Žižek); and geographical place proves to be irrelevant. Indeed, what makes frontier spaces indispensable to American national narratives, according to such a logic, is the cultural significance of participating in so-called "frontier" ventures and moving "beyond," activities which reinforce the symbolic structure of American citizenship

Following Foucault's challenge to a conventional treatment of space "as the dead, the fixed, the immobile," other theorists of space have characterized space as defined by movement or processes and assert a differential, oppositional relationship between space

and place. “Place,” David Harvey writes, “is the site of the inert body, reducible to the ‘being there’ of something permanent, in contrast to the instabilities of motions creating space” (*Justice* 262). Adding to such conceptions of “motions creating space” and emphasizing space’s constructedness, Henri Lefebvre writes in *The Production of Space* (1991) that “space has no ‘reality’ without the energy that is deployed within it” (13).¹¹ This account provocatively suggests that spatial “reality” is created not discovered, active not passive. We might understand this activity, in the Foucauldian sense of space, to articulate a tension between historical processes and to emphasize the ways in which the frontier “place” was always and already a “space.” We might, furthermore, think of the articulation of such tension to be, in a Lefebvrian sense, formative in our perceptions of “reality” and of knowing ourselves inside a dynamic system. The articulation of the tension of historical processes, in this formulation, repeatedly initiates a figurative re-drawing to reinforce of the frontierist boundaries of American citizenship. This re-drawing functions as both an expansion — to incorporate “new” formulations which reinforce the symbolic structure of American citizenship — and as an ideological shoring-up — to support the nation-state’s economic and political imperatives as a liberal democracy.

Since “re-drawing” in this context means to draw again figuratively in a way that supports hegemonic structures of power, what counts as “beyond” is, thus, not anything that compromises the boundaries of citizenship but that which expands the boundaries to include those things which are considered useful to the ideological pandects of the nation-state. As long as reliable labor was in short supply in the building of the transcontinental railroad, for example, Chinese men were welcome to emigrate to the U.S.; however, as soon as supply exceeded demand, the Exclusion Acts were initiated. It is, ironically, within such conceptual boundaries that “new” is considered better and going, or moving “beyond,” is considered good. Policed by the dominant structures of power, “new” is defined by an expansionist national narrative as that which can perform national identification in a way that is considered to ensure national security and socioeconomic strength.

¹¹ Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991.

We see an enactment of such a re-drawing at work in the popular American film *Forest Gump*, when in a moment of personal and therefore (according to the structure of the narrative) national crisis, Forest runs beyond the limits of mortal man to touch the boundaries of the nation — literally from coast to coast and back again — because, in his words, “He just felt like going.” *Forest Gump* is, in fact, an articulation of the boundaries of citizenship, and Gump’s character is a placeholder for ideal citizenship. Like a billboard for successful capitalism (the first shot of the film is of his Nike tennis shoes and he wears his Nike “swoop” T-shirt throughout the running), he is all image and form, and content is irrelevant for the most part. As much as the minor characters in the movie would like for Gump to offer some deep, philosophical explanation for why he is running (as a form of protest, to get attention for any number of causes), the only explanation he ever offers is that he simply “feels like” doing it. Intentionally, then, Gump stands for nothing. Within the context of the film, however, he functions as a place-holder for all that is allegedly valued in our modern-day capitalist culture: on one level, hard work, honesty, respect for authority, and kindness to others; and on another, the idea that if one performs these principles of good citizenship, one will be rewarded with personal profit: wealth and national recognition.¹² The system serves Gump, interestingly, not because he *tries* to be the ideal American citizen but because he is so much a part of the system that he cannot read any of its signs and understands everything literally except “Life is like a box of chocolates.” Forest Gump (the character), thus, literally re-draws the eastern and western boundaries of the nation (touching each on his run), running “beyond” the limits of mortal men; he furthermore figuratively reinforces the symbolic structure of the American nation-state with his run by serving as an exhibition of a national narrative of successful capitalism.¹³

Our inherited fantasies of mobilizing in frontier spaces are thus often manifested as spatiotemporal, literal and figurative movements “beyond,” but we never actually move beyond because our progress is over-determined by our nostalgic reconfigurations

¹² Gump is awarded the Purple Heart for his activities in Vietnam and later ends up on the cover of a *Forbes*-like magazine for his accidental success as a shrimper.

¹³ This success story operates on two levels: Gump, himself, becomes a successful capitalist over the course of the film, and his unintentionally meaningful run allows a number of different people to sell t-shirts and other products as they attempt to make meaning of it, so that they can make money from the run. These activities become the focus of news coverage of Gump’s run.

of a past of nostalgic reconfigurations. In other words, “We make our own history and geography,” Edward Soja writes, troping Marx, “but not just as we please: we do not make them under circumstances chosen by ourselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the historical geographies produced in the past” (129). Indeed, because American exceptionalism and history continue to be defined in large part through our successes as pioneers of an increasingly larger number of frontier spaces, these spaces collectively produce, in effect, virtual constellations or “historical geographies” of American national identity — constellations which are, in and of themselves, meaningless without our “American” participation, our image and imagination.

Of course, “American” frontier ventures signify “American” not because it is a distinctly American activity to move beyond — colonizing enterprises preceded and continue to exceed the formation of the American nation-state; rather, what makes such spaces signify “American” is “our” insistence that they do. Repeatedly, our so-called national narratives (figurative and literal) retroactively consolidate or naturalize American identity as distinctly frontierist. It is in this way, as Edward Soja has written, that

the production of spatiality in conjunction with the making of history [can be] described both as the medium and the outcome, the presupposition and the embodiment, of social action and relationship, of society itself . . . social life is materially constituted in its historical geography, that spatial structures and relations are the concrete manifestations of social structures and relations evolving over time, whatever the mode of production. (*Postmodern Geographies* 127)

The symbolic boundaries of American citizenship are similarly both the ideological medium and the outcome, presupposing a prior frontierist movement-beyond which requires the production and subsequent proliferation of “new” frontiers. American “social life” is, thus, “materially constituted” in an historical geography of figurative and literal frontiers. Indeed because, as Harvey also argues, “symbolic orderings of space and time provide a framework for experience through which we learn who or what we are in

society” (214), we should question what it means for a nation to know itself inside the symbolic structure of frontierist national narratives. The “symbolic orderings” of “American,” frontierist space and time concurrently “provide a framework for experience through which we learn who and what we are” and are the result of our imaginary production of just such a framework. The proliferation of these narratives in post-originary frontier America reveals that the symbolic ordering of “American” national identity continues to be organized around these ephemeral and often figurative frontier spaces. An interrogation of American frontier spaces consequently allows us to understand better American history and national identity, for it is often in narratives of frontier spaces that we find American nationalism most vividly rehearsed.

II. Capitalism and “Beyond”

Perhaps in part acknowledging a postmodern willingness to expand notions of spatio-temporality in the construction of cultural identity, Homi Bhabha posited in the mid-1990s that “it is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the *beyond*” (my emphasis; 7). “Being in the ‘beyond,’” Bhabha writes,

is to inhabit an intervening space, as any dictionary will tell you. But to dwell ‘in the beyond’ is also, as I have shown, to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historic commonality; *to touch the future on its hither side*. In that sense, then, the intervening space ‘beyond’ becomes a space of intervention in the here and now. (7)

Bhabha’s articulation of “being in the ‘beyond’” unwittingly emphasizes the qualities of the mythology of frontier spaces which make it translate so well to narratives of late-twentieth century figurative frontiers and which conjoins them to consumer culture. What motivates venture capitalists, for example — investors in a severely unstable future or temporal “beyond” — more forcefully than a desire to intervene in the “here and now” on their own behalf? The present and future, in this dynamic, are figuratively interwoven since the present is the gateway to an economically profitable future for venture

capitalists, figuratively the gateway to a space of unlimited resources. This present, furthermore, promises investors a chance to “touch the future on its hither side.” Much like the originary American frontier in this way, the future-obsessed present is about economic intervention, concurrently temporally “beyond” and “in” the here and now. Indeed, this “beyondness” of frontier mythology yokes spatial and temporal constructions of our activity as national subjects in the late twentieth century who are most often invited, as consumers, to intervene in the here and now.

Movement into a literal or figurative “beyond” is loosely identified, by many late-twentieth century narratives of frontier spaces, as the key to wholeness and coherence for American citizenship. This is because Americans have, by and large, bought into narratives of obsolescence (with new computer technology, for example) which threaten our sense of power over our lives because they insist that we repeatedly acknowledge our technological and economic inadequacies. In the cyberspatial frontier, for example, narratives selling computer-oriented materials construct American subjectivity as effects of technology “we” can purchase. Economic agency in these narratives is the only way to keep our technology up to date and avoid the planned obsolescence of the consumer technology cycle. Indeed, as a 1997 Panasonic ad for a SVGA monitor that is also a “high-performance TV” proclaims, “Now if the presentation’s boring, it’s your fault.” Having the economic power to buy the latest, “newest” technology may be, the narratives suggest, the only way to have a say in “redescrib[ing] our cultural contemporaneity.”

While the American frontier myth, or myth of a frontier space, evolves and mutates to serve the American nation-state, it continues to be used in the late-twentieth century as a rhetorical and ideological tool for structuring a markedly consumerist concept of American nationalism. Calvin Coolidge argued in 1919 that “‘physical frontiers’ of America might be gone, but ‘the great frontier of American character’ was alive and well. Keep the frontier alive by keeping its spirit alive. The physical frontier was replaced with new frontiers of business enterprise” (qtd. in David Wrobel 100). And as Henry Steele Commager wrote in 1933, “The old pioneers of the open frontier were the natural ancestors of the businessmen of the post-frontier age” (qtd. in Wrobel 127-128). Indeed, the myth of a frontier space is the “stable mythology” which facilitates the growth of American capitalism in the late-twentieth century.

Harvey identifies the newness of the “new-is-better-going-is-always-good” narratives of frontier spaces as typically capitalist. Capitalism is, he writes,

a revolutionary mode of production, always restlessly searching out *new* organizational forms, *new* technologies, *new* lifestyles, *new* modalities of production and exploitation and, therefore, *new* objective social definitions of time and space. Periodical reorganizations of space relations and of spatial representations have had an extraordinarily powerful effect. (*Justice* 240)

In keeping with capitalism’s “restless searching out” (an energy reminiscent of the “restless energy” which Turner claimed was “called out” by the frontier) of new technology and spatial representations, Microsoft ads assume their American audience shares this structure of values. They have asked us repeatedly over the last six years, “Where do you want to go today?” in their print and broadcast advertisements. Figuratively “going” — a frontierist and allegedly “free,” desirable activity, according to this Microsoft slogan — is facilitated by Microsoft technology. Similarly, the notion of “homesteading Home Pages” propagated by a GeoCities ad in 1997 imports the rhetoric of the originary frontier West and speaks to an assumed need to overcome our respective material locations and find “new” spaces inhabited by “people who share our ideals, interests, and passions.” This suggests, furthermore, that “ideals, interests, and passions” of people like us are products which can be consumed with the help of GeoCities. “Ideals, etc.” are, the ad implies, locatable in a cyber-frontier space and require mediation through computer-oriented technologies. Such a narrative suggests, ultimately, that subjectivity is a virtual, mobile location in a frontier space (<http://www.subjectivity.com>, for example,) and once there, we can claim our agency and own it, or lease it as the case may be, like a commodity.

In this way, frontierism in American culture has become a mythology which naturalizes the operations of capitalism. “The difficulty under capitalism,” as Harvey writes, “. . . is to find a stable mythology expressive of its inherent values and meanings” (217). Nonetheless, because it is most “true” to us in late capitalism in a way that is indifferent to the specific ecological and historical contexts of the American frontier

West, frontierism is a stable capitalist mythology. Like capitalism itself, frontierism restructures itself around economic and sociopolitical crises adapting (figuratively re-drawing its boundaries) to encompass whatever it needs to.

In that sense, we are, indeed, negotiating hyper-real frontiers — simulacra of the originary frontier West — in which “the territory no longer precedes the map” (Baudrillard 2).¹⁴ Baudrillard writes that with such spaces,

it is the map which precedes the territory — PRECESSION OF SIMULACRA — it is the map that engenders the territory. . . . The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth — it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true. (2, 1)

Essentially, frontier spaces in post-originary frontierist America are spaces which have been always already figured by notions of a pre-lapsarian originary American frontier that never really existed. They are, for this reason, simulacra par excellence. Ideologically, because they import the logic of this originary frontier space, “American” frontiers post-1890 have all been “mapped” before we label them “frontiers.” For this reason, like Žižek’s notion of “true ideology,” frontierism “functions as a ‘lie necessarily experienced as truth” (*Mapping Ideology* 13). The “lie” in this instance is the cultural logic of the frontier (transposed onto other spaces) which suggests that we can achieve “full” or complete American citizenship by participating in socioeconomic and political frontier ventures. Paradoxically, the content of this ideologically *stable* mythology, or “lie,” is characterized by relentlessly moving “beyond” and, thus, a corresponding spatio-temporal *instability*.

The instability of the content does not, however, detract from its ability to provide a stable mythology; on the contrary, the mutability of frontier mythology is what makes it so effective. This is necessary since, as Edward Soja argues,

The production of capitalist spatiality . . . is no once-and-for-all event. The spatial matrix must constantly be reinforced and, when necessary, restructured —

¹⁴ From Jean Baudrillard’s “The Precession of Simulacra,” in *Simulations*, Trans. P. Foss, P. Patton, and P. Beitchman, New York: Semitext(e), 1983, 1-80.

that is, spatiality must be socially reproduced, and this reproduction process is a continuing source of conflict and crisis. (129)

Indeed, what made the space in the West a “frontier” space was that it recorded the physical and psychic instability of a people — their hopes and dreams, crises and conflicts — constantly in motion: pursuing the “free land” *there*, or imagining that they could; confronting and coming into conflict with other cultures *there*, or imagining that they could; and pursuing successfully or unsuccessfully the economic potential of unexploited resources in the allegedly “open” space *there*, or imagining that they could. Similarly, the rhetoric of the originary frontier has been used to define figurative frontier spaces and their relationship to American national identity in various ways. The proliferation of such figurative frontiers underscores the importance of the mythology of a frontier space “beyond” to a distinctly capitalist “American” experience of history, and, thus, to our very conceptions of the nationally valued civic identity available to us, an identity predicated on our power as consumers, our connection to an “American” socioeconomy.

III. Structures of Power: Mobility, Stasis, and Frontier Desire

Historically, the essential promise — or curse — of the frontier to European Americans has been the ways that movement into a frontier space has defined the American “spirit” and national identity. Nearly all contemporary frontier narratives, whether literal or figurative, acknowledge that this fundamental narrative of Americanization privileges a spatiotemporal, frontierist movement “beyond” to as yet uncharted spaces and/or times which have not yet come to pass. “Movement,” Turner wrote at the end of the twentieth century, “has been its [the frontier’s] dominant fact” (37). Furthermore, he argued that the “essence” of the American frontier is “the graphic line which records the expansive energies of the people” (52). These frontier narratives of expansion and led to a corresponding fear of stasis. Stasis, a frontierist logic might conclude, could mean death to the American economy, to the so-called American way of life, and to the very concept of American nationalism. As a result, frontier anxiety is often depicted as most intense

when it seems as though stasis is imminent. “Anxiety,” Žižek writes in reference to a Lacanian theory of desire, “is brought on by the disappearance of desire” (*Looking Awry* 8). To whatever extent this is true, frontier anxiety might be understood to be brought on not by the disappearance of any specific frontier space but by a disappearance of desire for mobilizing in frontiers, figuratively and/or literally. Perhaps it was just such a decrease in desire that Turner feared when he delivered his speech at Chicago’s Columbian Exhibition in 1893.

In this frontierist structure of desire, mobilizing in frontier ventures becomes the structuring element of the symbolic network of American nationalism. According to this structure, our desire for mobility and our mobilizing activity become marked as moral and the frontier is imagined to be a thing of “supreme plenitude.” “The element which represents,” as Žižek writes — in this case, the frontier — “the element which only holds the place of a certain lack is perceived as a point of supreme plenitude” (99). Not mobilizing is correspondingly marked as passivity, an implicitly immoral lack. Waldo Frank’s *Our America* (1919) describes just such a moral structure. According to him, the frontier age is a time in which “virtues which lent themselves to material conquest and to endurance were extolled: virtues which called for inner peace or levied energy without a manifest material return were vices” (qtd. in Wrobel 108). Also drawing on an allegedly ahistorical romantic notion of frontier virtues, Doc Holliday asserts in *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* (1957), “The only thing I’m really afraid of is dying in bed.” Stop moving, such narratives suggest, and figuratively die — be immoral, be a weak link in the system, remain a “partial citizen” as Lauren Berlant calls it.

In *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997), Berlant writes that certain groups have historically been

excluded from the national promise which, because it was a promise, was held out paradoxically: falsely, as a democratic reality, and legitimately, as a promise, the promise that the democratic citizenship form makes to people caught in history. The populations who were and are managed by the discipline of the promise — women, African Americans, Native Americans, immigrants, homosexuals — have long experienced simultaneously the wish to be full citizens and the violence of their partial citizenship. (19)

Our anxiety about — and, indeed, investment in — such “partial citizenship” is evident in the cultural logic of the frontier which suggests that it is only through movement “beyond” that one can have power as a “complete,” “moral” American citizen. We are all, in that sense, “managed by the discipline of the promise” of the frontier. Many American “progress” narratives about science, technology, the strong or “whole” self, the productive American citizen are, thus, markers of our anxiety about stasis and fragmentation, or lack of assimilation to a unified American national identity, a dynamic which Žižek (via Freud and Lacan) describes as the general dynamic of identity formation. And many narratives about the American West (and its “masculine” hero), cyberspace, Mars exploration, and American citizenship serve as placeholders for a fiction of power.

The cultural logic of the frontier asserts, then, that if we are willing and able to move into and master the frontier space beyond, we will be awarded coherence, completeness, and power. A 1996 MCI advertisement proposes that we “imagine a world in which there is no gender, no race, no infirmity,” thereby suggesting that this empowered subjectivity, this complete identity which is held out as the promise of power, is explicitly coded as white, masculine and economically healthy. Indeed, the transformative power of the frontier has always been to “turn you from a weakling into a man,” as Theodore Roosevelt was fond of saying with regard to the originary American frontier. The transformation has never been imagined to involve turning you into a woman or any other implicitly weaker or less desirable corporeally grounded subject. However, because frontiers are imagined to be “new,” fluid, always-changing spaces, frontierism is predicated on a consumerist structure of prefigured and overdetermined obsolescence. In the end of *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* (Sam Peckinpah 1970), for example, Hogue realizes that it is time to move beyond, and that the West he is in is no longer the frontier, when his formerly profitable watering hole is passed up by a “horseless carriage.”

Indeed, because the frontier is always “beyond,” we can never really have access to it or establish ourselves firmly within it. One can never, in fact, actually settle in frontier spaces. Furthermore, the cultural logic of the frontier which asserts that each of us, as individuals, can strengthen ourselves by making “complete” our respective

identities, erroneously imagines that the individual is potentially coherent. In fact, such a logic minimizes individual consumer identities with narratives of a collective, national identity, a fiction naturalized through the cultural logic of the frontier. Frontier space is, thus, an ideological space which, as Žižek writes,

is made up of non-bound, non-tied elements, ‘floating signifiers,’ whose very identity is ‘open,’ overdetermined by their articulation in a chain with other elements. . . . The ‘quilting’ performs the totalization by means of which this free floating of ideological elements is halted, fixed — that is to say, by means of which they become parts of a structural network of meaning. (87)

These moves toward totalization are, however, always in the process of being undercut even as they are being articulated. Gump’s Nike shirt, for example, would not suggest what it does about his content-less, billboard-like symbolic self were it not a part of a larger structure of forms and images in which the shirt is, in context, merely one link in a signifying chain whose larger structure of meaning is the boundaries of American citizenship. Nonetheless, the “running” joke is, in this portion of the movie, that content is generally as meaningless and ultimately insignificant as Gump is, and any attempt to fix or locate it is a waste of time. In “real” American culture, the larger structure of meaning is, as I have said, American national identity. This structure of meaning is, furthermore, dependent upon both the nationalistic valuing of the white, male economically successful individual and the nationalistic de-valuing of the non-white, non-male, economically unsuccessful individual.

Using “democracy” as an exemplary case, Žižek argues that a “certain pure signifier” can be defined only in terms of what it is not. Like both literal and figurative frontier spaces, and like the Gump-like valued individual identity which supports the structure of American citizenship, democracy has no “positive content,” Žižek argues; rather, it signifies through a “differential relation.” For American culture, the value of frontier has been both nothing and the promise of everything. It is a pure and empty signifier, the promise of which has been argued to signify the essential content of American national identity for over five centuries. It is the space which we can never

settle, the idea that we can never realize — for as soon as we do, it ceases to be frontierist. Indeed, in its inherent ephemerality, the frontier both stabilizes (collectively) and destabilizes (individually) the subjectivity of an entire nation. The frontier is “like” nothing else. And as soon as we try to define its content — a wilderness, a safety-valve, a line, a border between, a site of conflict or sociopolitical promise — it eludes us. In effect, the frontier is the radically excluded element which holds together or quilts the various socioeconomic and political elements of American nationalism and capitalism.

IV. The Frontierist Subject of American Citizenship

In order for the quilting to be successful, something must be repressed or denied. What, then, we must ask, does the frontierist structure of American citizenship and capitalism repress in order to form a more coherent whole? The short answer to this question — to which I have alluded — is that “non-valued” individual identities are repressed by the national consciousness which depends upon the logic of the frontier for its coherence or wholeness. This symbolic repression suggests that our completeness as individuals is always and already beyond our grasp because the logic of the frontier, and its multiple literal and figurative “locations,” both reinforces (collectively) and undermines (individually) our ability to achieve coherence. As Brian McHale writes of the plurality of “worlds” characteristic of some postmodern fiction,

A poetics in which the category ‘world’ is plural, unstable and problematic would seem to entail a model of the self which is correspondingly plural, unstable, and problematic. If we posit a plurality of worlds, then conceivably “my” self exists in more than one of them. (253)

Not only are we potentially psychically fragmented by our multiple selves that might coexist in multiple “cyber-worlds,”¹⁵ as the 1996 MCI ad I cite posits, our participation in the cyber-frontier promises us the power to *overcome*, not to empower, our racialized,

¹⁵ Indeed, many chat-room fanatics are regularly involved in concurrent discussions in multiple chat rooms. In one, they may be writing as if they were one aspect of themselves, while alternately writing as multiple others in other rooms.

gendered, or otherwise “infirm” bodies. Difference, according to this structure, is acknowledged and then reinscribed as a white, male, economically privileged “default” citizenship. Indeed, everyone’s, according to Lacan, is psychically split, so if we buy into a Lacanian notion of subject formation (and I mean to suggest here that most, if not all, Americans do on some level) then even the most nationally valued or “successful” white businessman can never be successful “enough,” a complete citizen. It is, in part, the frontierist logic which splits us in the late-twentieth, early-twenty-first century. The push to pursue post-originary frontier spaces is, thus, a push motivated by the national desire for national coherence through the expansion of capital, often at the expense of individual and minority group identification.

Indeed, we are motivated by a fiction promising coherence which insists that we concede that that coherence is always and already beyond our respective grasps. Our desire as individuals to become “whole” or “full” citizens is reinforced by the national narrative which implies that that counting or existing in the nation-state is about making the right choices. If we, like Forest Gump, are “good” enough and assist in the national project of pursuing “new,” sanctioned frontiers to expand the boundaries of and reinforce the symbolic structure of American citizenship, we can consider ourselves “American.” Of course, this frontierist structure ensures that such “rewards” are always “beyond”; and that is precisely what makes it desirable. We can never fully achieve “full” citizenship (it is always in the process of becoming), but we must pursue it or fail to be deemed worthy of calling ourselves American. Or so the story goes.

Because we can never really establish ourselves in the frontier (it ceases to be a frontier as soon as we do), the “American” frontier fiction is a self-perpetuating one, subject to the same structure of planned obsolescence computer companies use to sell computers. And as long as there is desire for it, there will be no end to the frontier. As Eliot West writes, the “American West,” the originary frontier of the American imagination, “isn’t really on any map” (271). The “American” frontier has always been figurative, always “beyond,” and it will always be beyond, a collective phantasm, a projection of our desires. The cultural logic of the frontier will, furthermore, continue to structure our American imaginations, our fictions of power and control, our definitions of citizenship. The frontier will, in short, continue to be what we need it to be — a fantasy

space reproducing us in its own image and structuring power (economic and social) and our quintessentially “American” national identity.

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