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Where East Meets West: On Some Locations of America

Abstract: The paper offers a reading of the westward movement of the American frontier as a passage to an imaginary land in which the actual topographical displacement is accompanied by various, sometimes contradictory, images of the future. The settlers envisioned various Americas, the visions coming from their own experiences as well as from the stereotypically European projection of America as a paradise and as an object of possession. Such, sometimes contradictory, visions are noticeable in attempts at conceptualizing the frontier and its significance not only (explicitly) by Turner, but also less directly by such writers and thinkers as Thoreau, Whitman, or Bourne. Their Americas are in fact imaginary constructs reworking the encounter of East and West, frequently mixing not only discovery with invention, but also relocating, like Whitman in "Passage to India," two of the cardinal directions of the world and thus, as it were, "transnationalizing" America.

Keywords: frontier, topography, wilderness, H. D. Thoreau, F. J. Turner, W. Whitman.

You may name it America, but it is not America.
—Henry David Thoreau, *Walking*

John Donne, quite a long time ago now, compared his mistress going to bed (in "To His Mistress Going to Bed," 1631) to America, thus expressing his desire for a singular possession and a singular rule over a territory:

> Licence my roving hands, and let them go
> Before, behind, between, above, below.
> O, my America, my Newfoundland,
> My kingdom, safest when with one man mann'd,
> My mine of precious stones, my empery;
> How am I blest in thus discovering thee! (l. 25-30)

What appears to have incited the poet's magniloquence is the grammatically feminine gender of the name of the continent(s) which, in Donne's time, had already been discovered, though remained as yet unexplored. Columbus's work of discovery and the symbolic marriage with Vespucci, whose feminized first name America carries, go unmentioned in this well—known poem, and the discovery literally lies in the hands of the loving caresser. The name, which is a token of the conviction that America has already rightfully belonged to Europe, still awakens the need of discovery, though

the discovery is not exactly a matter of becoming recognized or identified. America is posited as an imaginary source of richness, of precious stones to be excavated from beneath the surface of her Italian name in the form of pure pleasure of individual possession of a woman.

This America of old is not a land of knowing, an object of an intellectual inquiry. Rather, it is a space of "having," the only trace of knowing being that of "manning"—perhaps in the manner Adam "manned" Eve through what King James translated by means of the verb "to know" ("And Adam knew Eve his wife," Gen. 4.1). Donne is in fact not interested in anything coming from overseas, and the woman he desires to "man" is not an American woman, but a European and perhaps an English one. The newness of this seemingly new "land" consists in her nakedness, in her becoming "unlaced" so as to reveal the "beauteous state" of the body. This state is not, as yet, an "empery," a body politic, though it will become one at the end of the poem, where the body of the naked man covers the naked body of the woman in a scene which is a peculiar scene of teaching: "To teach thee, I am naked first; why then / What needst thou have more covering than a man?" (l. 47-48). However farfetched and incongruous the metaphysical conceit may be, the project lurking in the poem seems to be quite consistent. The America which figures in it is but a bare territory, a land without Indians upon which a new world will be built by a unification of European bodies, in which "manning" of women is at the same time a kind of protective clothing and building, a covering of the land by men whose nakedness is, say, not quite naked and serves the function of sheltering and securing the nakedness of the feminine body. What is thus, though implicitly, brought into the discourse about America is a reworking of the Adamic myth of innocence and life in a paradise, though one in which the desire to "fondle" women is not a sign of human fall, but part and parcel of the newness of the future offered by the new world. The experience of post-lapsarian shame is quite cunningly eliminated from that world through positing naked Adam as a kind of clothing, as a carrier of an innocent culture which, in the American context, will become the sign of progress and achievement. This innocent covering of the feminine, the covering whose production does not need any activity on her part, constitutes a proto-culture in which labor, another post-lapsarian effect, figures as "manning" in the economic sense—providing a crew of people to perform some kind of work.

It was in this vein that the now classical figure of R. W. B. Lewis's American Adam reappeared in the nineteenth century as an ideal of national persona—an "image contrived to embody the most fruitful contemporary ideas… that of the authentic American as a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities poised at the start of a new history" (i). Interestingly, Lewis calls this proto-culture the beginning of "a native American mythology" (i)—the word "native" marking Adam as newly born in America, as a native who is not quite identifiable with Indians. The new world needs a new kind of paradise in which innocence is a heroic kind of work. Work thus, importantly, ceases to be God's punishment for transgression, but

a potentiality not so much of regaining paradise, but of making it anew, away from the east, away from England and Europe. From the American perspective, the Old World becomes an unwelcome space, perhaps the space east of Eden to which Cain was exiled (Genesis 4:16).

Donne's imaginary transoceanic excursion to America seems to be a trait of the exhaustion of England, and perhaps also of Europe, as a place of authentic and innocent "manning." The potential of authentic possession, of manning by one man, is in Donne transported to America, to the west, which figures as a land of newness no longer accessible on the old continent. The old world demands a resurrection, a new nativity which the discovery of the new world has begun to promise. America stands for the promise of the change of the world and constitutes the frontier of that world, the promise of transition in which America itself, or perhaps herself, is also so to speak transitory. Adam should live in Paradise, not in America, and the new history Lewis envisions may well be read as the history of the world rather than that of America.

America is difficult to embrace as a being in itself, as an autonomous sovereign entity or state, as it is in fact more or less the whole of the Western world that has contributed to its making. Writing that "America was… the achievement by which Europe most truly revealed her own nature" (387), Fernand Braudel seems to be claiming that America is an expression of a nature that could not be fully expressed in Europe, an expression of a desire to break free from the old, which also speaks beneath the rhetoric of possession in Donne's poem. Geographically, this desire for the new beginning seems to be paradoxical, as the location of America west of Europe is rhetorically loaded with an end, with the end of the day, with decline, or with death. It is in the east that things begin, but they inevitably move westward, though not necessarily toward an end. It is again John Donne who in "Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness" brings in the theme, claiming that topographically, east and west are one and that their meeting place is the promise of resurrection: "What shall my east hurt me? As west and east / In all flat maps—and I am one—are one. / So death doth touch the resurrection" (l. 13-15). It is not exactly, as Ladan Niayesch writes, that the east is "a place diversely evoking resurrection and the siege of earthly Paradise" (47). The evocation is instigated through the encounter of the west which, rather than a place, is a direction, an unexplored space of the future whose earthly token may well be Donne's America, a paradise of unity situated somewhere away from the old world.

West as the direction of a new beginning was a theme dear to Henry David Thoreau, to whom Donne's poetry was quite well known: he ascribed to the poet "an occasional fine distinction and poetic utterance of a high order" (qtd. in Smith 191). The west of which Thoreau spoke, however, did not figure as Donne's "empery." It "was but another name for the Wild," and it was there, in the wildness of this west, that he was famously seeking the preservation of the world, finding the east to be an unwelcome burden of the past: "Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free" (Thoreau 34). Going, or walking, west is a liberating movement which he

also calls "progress." He ascribes it not only to Americans, but generally to mankind, though without attributing to that movement any particular task or end: "I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe. And that way the nation is moving, and I may say that mankind progress from east to west" (34). Though from John Donne's seventeenth-century perspective there was only one America, Thoreau's America seems to be split into two wests, a division both temporal and spatial. His Oregon lies not only west of Concord, but also in the future, while both Oregon and Concord lie, importantly, west of Europe, which, like the biblical land of Nod, is located not only east of the Eden of the new world, but also in the past:

> We go eastward to realize history, and study the works of art and literature, retracing the steps of the race; we go westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure. The Atlantic is a Lethean stream, in our passage over which we have had an opportunity to forget the old world and its institutions. If we do not succeed this time, there is perhaps one more chance for the race left before it arrives on the banks of the Styx; and that is in the Lethe of the Pacific, which is three times as wide. (34)

Though the old world has not been quite forgotten and reminds about itself on the American east coast, there is still a hope to cross another water of forgetfulness, another Lethe, which is located this time west of America. To move west in fact means to follow the Sun, the universally natural way of the world, and Thoreau quite explicitly calls the Sun "the Great Western Pioneer" who "appears to migrate westward daily and tempt us to follow him" (35). Not everybody, however, yields to the temptation, and some decide to live a sedentary life of settlers—a life that is, as most readers of Thoreau well know, the life of quiet desperation—and remain, at least mentally, in the east. Thoreau's westward movement is a reflection of a global kind of desire to know more than oneself, which he evokes in *Walden* through a slightly distorted reference to the Enlightenment call of Alexander Pope. Pope's "Know then Thyself" from *An Essay on Man* changes in *Walden* into "explore Thyself," the exploration being much more demanding than simple observation as it transgresses all borders and divisions:

> obey the precept of the old philosopher, and Explore thyself. Herein are demanded the eye and the nerve.… Start now on that farthest western way, which does not pause at the Mississippi or the Pacific, nor conduct toward a worn-out China or Japan, but leads on direct, a *tangent* to this sphere, summer and winter, day and night, sun down, moon down, and at last earth down too. (287, italics added)

Thoreau's progress goes west tangentially, and the exploration thus performed only touches the land, perhaps, as in Donne, caresses it with roving hands, though, in Thoreau, without appropriating the land. The progress is contiguous to the surface of the America located west of the Mississippi, and to the world west of the Pacific,

which has been traditionally classified as eastern. What prompts this exploration is "the westward tendency" (Thoreau 609) which Thoreau ascribes in *Walking* also to Columbus, who going west was also going east, though not necessarily to America:

> I walk out into a nature such as the old prophets and poets Menu, Moses, Homer, Chaucer, walked in. You may name it America, but it is not America. Neither Americus Vespucius, nor Columbus, nor the rest were the discoverers of it. There is a truer account of it in Mythology than in any history of America so called that I have seen. (604)

America, or whatever you name it, figures here as something that nowadays may well be called a transnational project, a project in which one may observe America neither from within nor from above, but as it were tangentially. Thoreau, praising the tangential movement with nature, did study America, though from a slightly estranged perspective, and saw in it both continuations of Europe and ways of evading those continuations, though not in the building of an exceptional nation demanding obedience from its citizens-members. A tangential perspective allows for a certain non-belonging, a view from the vantage point of a neighbor rather than that of a member, a perspective that allows one to individually wander, or saunter, without territorializing the space in which one is moving. We all neighbor with America, and perhaps it is the idea of neighboring which might enable us to evade being "enmeshed in a battle over the idea of America" (299), as Alice Kessler-Harris phrases it, to evade the search for the essences of America and its identities, and look for Americas in what seems to be our own milieus. Such a transnational perspective is also, inevitably, a multicultural one. As such, Kessler-Harris writes, "despite its refusal to acknowledge a stable meaning or precise unchanging definition of America," it "nevertheless opens the possibility of conceiving democratic culture as a process in whose transformation we are all invited to participate" (313).

Though Thoreau scarcely used the word "democracy" in his writings, in *Civil Disobedience* it appears alongside the idea of respect for individual neighboring with an imaginary state which as yet has not been discovered, even in the already existing America:

> Is a democracy, such as we know it, the last improvement possible in government? Is it not possible to take a step further towards recognizing and organizing the rights of man? There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly. I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow-men. A State which bore this kind of fruit, and

> suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, but not yet anywhere seen. (659)

Perhaps America did prepare the way for a more perfect state, yet its westward movement is not complete despite its frontier having moved away from the east and having crossed the Mississippi. The west does awaken the truly democratic spirit; it bears its fruit, but simultaneously drops it off in making it an object of the settler economy governed by demands of sedentary life. West of the Mississippi is a promised land in Thoreau, though not because of the possibility of settling, but rather because of the potential of awakening wildness, even in domestic creatures which somehow miraculously turn into buffalos:

> I love even to see the domestic animals reassert their native rights, any evidence that they have not wholly lost their original wild habits and vigor; as when my neighbor's cow breaks out of her pasture early in the spring and boldly swims the river, a cold, gray tide, twenty-five or thirty rods wide, swollen by the melted snow. It is the buffalo crossing the Mississippi. (621)

The state as it was in Thoreau's time did not quite tolerate buffalos, bringing them to near extinction at the end of the nineteenth century.

Having crossed the Mississippi, the state at that time paused at the Pacific and officially announced in 1890 the closing of the American frontier. The argument of the superintendent of the U.S. Census for that year read that "[u]p to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so *broken into* by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line" (qtd. in Turner, 199). Frederic Jackson Turner's seminal essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," which was prompted by the event, was presented in 1893 at a special meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago that also celebrated four hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America. Interestingly, for Turner the closing of the frontier did not mean the end of the making of America, as with the "going" of the frontier "has closed the first period of American history" (227). This idea closes the essay, and potential future historical developments are not predicted in it.

In the text of the essay, the movement of the frontier is presented as a smooth process of America's distancing herself from Europe. This process is in fact as natural and unstoppable as the movement of a glacier, a blind kind of movement insensitive to the question of the near extermination of Indians which it involved:

> Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American. As successive terminal moraines result from successive glaciations, so each frontier leaves its traces behind it, and when it becomes a settled area the

> region still partakes of the frontier characteristics. Thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines. (201)

The frontier, as it seems, cannot be fully closed, and its traces still remain in the settled areas even in 1893, to which also the switch from the use of the past tense to present perfect testifies. Turner's America needs the frontier, and John Kennedy's 1960 project of New Frontier seems to be a continuation of this vision. The frontier may become officially closed down, but adjacent to it, or perhaps tangential, is Thoreau's "westward tendency" for which the west need not be literally in the west, but elsewhere, anyway away from the frontier. And it is again Turner who in 1896, three years after he published his essay, presented the frontier in a school dedication in Portage as a paradise-like space of constant rejuvenation in which wildness functioned as a constitutive outside of sorts, an outside whose tangential presence he compared to a generous bank of nature which credits the endeavors of democracy:

> Americans had a safety valve for social danger, a bank account on which they might continually draw to meet losses. This was the vast unoccupied domain that stretched from the borders of the settled area to the Pacific Ocean.... No grave social problem could exist while the wilderness at the edge of civilizations [*sic*] opened wide its portals to all who were oppressed, to all who with strong arms and stout heart desired to hew out a home and a career for themselves. Here was an opportunity for social development continually to begin over again, wherever society gave signs of breaking into classes. Here was a magic fountain of youth in which America continually bathed and was rejuvenated. (qtd. in Cullen 142)

What strikes Jim Cullen, from whose book I am quoting this passage, is "the elegiac tone of Turner's speech: he spoke in the past tense" (143). Perhaps bringing this note of sadness in, Turner expresses a nostalgically rooted hope for reaching more distant spheres of wilderness, more distant edges of civilization so as to make the rejuvenating bathing available again. Yet Turner's insistence on America's turning her back upon both Europe and the Atlantic Ocean, representative of what Henry Nash Smith more generally called the agrarian tradition, "made it difficult for Americans to think of themselves as members of a world community" (260). This tradition also treated the oceans as protective moats that shielded the growth of America from foreign frosts and blights (cf. Okihiro, 75). Gary Okihiro rightly notes in his paper on the Pacific linkages with America that the maritime tradition was an equally Eurocentric variant of Turner's agrarianism as it "simply stressed the American side of Atlantic civilization, and the connection charted by Columbus between America and Europe remained the central feature of a more global view of U.S. history" (76). However, as we have seen, Thoreau brought in the Pacific as an extended version of the Mississippi, and he praised Columbus not so much for the discovery as for his

already mentioned "westward tendency," in which the discovery was but an incident on the way to Asia.

Though you may name it America, it was more than the America that Columbus discovered. Thoreau's westward movement to Japan and China somehow ascribes to him a vision, or rather an intuition, of a spiritually unified world in which, or to which, America was but a passage. It does not really matter for Thoreau whether the discovered space is in America or in Africa, and the little that is provided to him in the woods is but a provision for a journey he encourages us to embark upon, again evoking the name of Columbus: "Were preserved meats invented to preserve meat merely? Nay, be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought. Every man is the lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the Czar is but a petty state, a hummock left by the ice" (286). The named earthly empires are posited here again as tangential to the individual empire of exploration, and the explorer does not really care about naming places. Even the cardinal directions of the world are not relevant for the experts "in home-cosmography" practiced by one who chooses to be a Columbus, and Thoreau at one point seems to be conflating Africa and the west: "What does Africa, what does the West stand for?" (286). Though the impulse to open the channels of thought comes to Thoreau from the American west, their strength of transportation leads them away from any particular locations.

The idea of America as a passage was later in the nineteenth century taken up by Walt Whitman, who, fascinated with the improvements of transportation technology, saw in American railways one of the means to carry his mind to a realm which may be named India, and which was not India. His poem "Passage to India" (1871) radically breaks all borders and frontiers in search of a brotherhood of men and souls for whom America is but a rondure on which the Pacific Railroad has been built "Tying the Eastern to the Western sea / The road between Europe and Asia" (l. 64-65) and thus enabling approach to the East from the east. Equally important as the construction of the Pacific Railroad was for Whitman the building of the Suez Canal, which made India more easily approachable from the west. Whitman's project in this sometimes rhetorically convoluted poem is a kind of expertise home-cosmography and topography in which nothing seems to be where it is and what it is:

> Passage to more than India!
> O secret of the earth and sky!
> Of you O waters of the sea! O winding creeks and rivers!
> Of you O woods and fields! of you strong mountains of my land!
> Of you O prairies! of you gray rocks! O morning red! O clouds! O rain and snows!
> O day and night, passage to you! (l. 233-38)

There is some America in Whitman's "more than India"—strong mountains, woods and fields, prairies—but the continent, Ratan Bhattacharjee notes, "is celebrated as a force of modernization. Whitman sees both [India and America] as caught up in an

inexorable thrust toward globalization, where all countries are swept up in the same push toward progress" (1493). The interconnection of the world is technologically strengthened not only by the transcontinental railway, but also by the transatlantic undersea cable, which is a part of the link between East and West and between Past and Present: "The seas inlaid with eloquent gentle wires; / Yet first to sound, and ever sound, the cry with thee O soul, / The Past! the Past! the Past!" (l. 5-9). This global connectedness of the world enables the neighboring of times and places in which no place is more central than others, in which no place, or state, is exceptional. India is more than India because it reaches beyond itself, and so is America.

However outlandish Whitman's poem may seem, it does express a craving for what I have tentatively addressed here as "going west"—a continuation of Columbus's, however failed, passage to India—though no longer in the name of some monarch, state, or nation, but in the name of a connectedness of people which America, quite a long time ago now, incited—not only in John Donne.

If America is more than America, then the question of its identity becomes slightly problematic, especially as an object of study. The question of what we study when studying America, in the light of America's interconnectedness with more or less all bright and dark places of the world, also largely depends on where we study, as this "where" may well be the more of America. Writing not so long ago, in 1916, about a trans-national America, Randolph Bourne claimed that "we shall have to give up the search for our native 'American' culture" (91). Having put the word "American" in inverted commas, he still retained the possessive "our," thus as it were delegating the search to those who are American natives, though not necessarily Indians. What slightly deconstructs this exclusive "we," however, is Bourne's simultaneous claim that "there is no distinctively American culture" (91).

This last statement, which clearly questions the idea of American exceptionalism, prompts Winfried Fluck to try to prove that Bourne's idea also carries with it traces of exceptionalism: "Bourne's reinterpretation of American culture as a transnational culture thus remains a theory about the difference American culture makes" (60). This makes the American difference into a kind of exceptionalism, especially in the light of Bourne's use of such statements as "Only America… can lead in this cosmopolitan enterprise" (Bourne 96, qtd. in Fluck 60). The next sentence in Bourne's text, however, makes the argument a little more complex, and writing about Americans, though limiting them by some kind of belonging, opens up a space which clearly may be called more than American:

> Only the American—and in this category I include the migratory alien who has lived with us and caught the pioneer spirit and a sense of new social vistas—has the chance to become that citizen of the world. America is coming to be, not a nationality but a trans-nationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors. (96)

The pioneer spirit, as we have seen, also moved Columbus westward, and the idea of weaving with other lands was also an impulse of Whitman's passage to more than India. Bourne's "migratory alien" is not an exceptional being; he or she may arrive from any place in the world, and they need not be detached from their pasts which constitute yet another sphere of Whitman's passaging. The westward movement I am discussing here carries within it both the past and the future, and if by exceptionalism may be meant an attempt "to detach the United States' history from comparable pasts" (Kramer 1357), this detachment can only be postulated as an ideological project of unity, a project which, in the case of defining an object of study, may seem quite useful, though it necessarily closes the frontier of exploration to what, in this case America, is.

Fluck's critique of Bourne's transnational America from 1916 is, more generally, a critique of transnational American studies for its fear of being accused of exceptionalism: "One of the reasons why American Studies scholars are currently hesitant to acknowledge that, although American culture may not have developed autonomously, it has nevertheless developed under conditions of its own, is that they are afraid of being accused of exceptionalism" (60). Though he claims that "the development of a transnational perspective is a welcome new research agenda in American Studies" (61), what this perspective somehow misses in his view is a clearly defined and delimited object of study, "a system of underlying premises about one's object of study and the best way to analyze it" without which we might be talking about something more than there is, for example. Without such a system, we would not only be unable to make meaningful claims about an object of interpretation, but "[in] fact, we would not have any object" (62). We thus, as it seems, would not have America, at least as it, or she, is. And we, be it inclusive or exclusive, do not have her.

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In Editor's Note to one of the issues of *The Journal of Transnational American Studies*, Shelley Fisher Fishkin thus wrote about "our field":

> The more we learn, it seems, the less we know. Definitions of our field that may have appeared to be clear a few years ago may now appear to be more blurred or porous than we thought. What is our object of study? What methods do we use to study it? As we endlessly debate these basic questions, we sometimes feel we may be further away from, rather than closer to, answering the question, *What is transnational American Studies?* (4)

Being "further away," as it seems, need not be a negative judgment, and the feeling of loss is somehow inscribed within the predicament of any kind of American studies, if only for the reason that it all started with Columbus's going to the East by way of going "further away" from it. His actions, Stephen Greenblatt notes, were "performed

entirely *for a world elsewhere*" (56). What they have performed there, and how, seem to be questions of relevance for transnational American Studies, regardless of where the *elsewhere* may be.

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