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A Home on the Range and the (Near) Extinction of the American Bison

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Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam,
Where the deer and the antelope play.
(*My Western Home* and *A Home on the Range*)

The still popular song “A Home on the Range” may well be read as an implicit praise of America seen as a dreamland without Indians. In the 1876 version of the song titled “My Western Home” written by Brewster Higley, Indians do not appear at all while the land is populated not only by the roaming buffalo and the playing deer and antelope, but also by other creatures large and small (the graceful white swan, the beaver, the salmon). The landscape described in the song can hardly be called wild or sublime and could well have been painted by John Constable rather than by Asher Durand:

Oh, give me the land where the bright diamond sand
Throws its light from the glittering stream Where gli-
deth along the graceful white swan, Like a maid in
a heavenly dream. (Higley: 219)

In the 1910 version of the song modified by John A. Lomax and titled “A Home on the Range” Indians are mentioned, though their presence in the text figures only as a distant appearance which simultaneously brings a hope of their remaining distant forever:

The red man was pressed from this part of the West
He’s likely no more to return,
To the banks of Red River where seldom if ever
Their flickering camp-fires burn. (Lomax, 39)

Brewster Higley’s version of the song, the one without Indians, was adopted as the official state song of Kansas as late as 1947, though not without reservations. The disagreements, however, concerned not so much Indians as the roaming and playing of American antelopes whose presence in the text did not faithfully reflect their already extinct status in Kansas:

Supporters claimed that the song was written in the state and portrayed an earlier time in the state’s history. Detractors said that the song was erroneous since antelope no longer roamed the plains and antiquated in its portrayal of the state. (Kansapedia)

There were no objections as to the roaming buffalo. In 1947 a few herds of the reintroduced species lived in state parks and on private land. At the beginning of the 20th century, however, there were only about 500 buffalo left in the whole of the United States, and when Lomax published his version of the song they were still almost extinct, at least in comparison with the estimated number of 20 million populating the Great Plains before the arrival of settlers. Throughout the twentieth century the American bison kept being reintroduced to the country, to become the national mammal of the United States in May 2016, when President Barack Obama signed the National Bison Legacy Act – 234 years after the bald eagle became the country’s national bird. The bald eagle itself still faced extinction in the 1950s and was only removed from the federal government’s list of endangered species in 1995. With the Bison Legacy Act,

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as John Cavelli (the Executive Vice President for the Public Affairs Division of the Wildlife Conservation Society) phrased it, bison took “a place alongside the bald eagle as a national symbol to be revered” describing the species as “an ecological keystone, cultural bedrock and economic driver” which “conveys values such as unity, resilience and commitment to healthy landscapes and communities” (American Icon). Though almost exterminated throughout the nineteenth century, bison is thus symbolically revived to be revered no longer as a wild creature of the past, but as a breed which only carries some traces of the buffalo roaming the prairies in the text of “My Western Home.”

One peculiar aspect of the American westward movement throughout the nineteenth century seems to have been precisely the bringing to near extinction not only of Indians, but also of certain animal species, some of which, like the roaming buffalo and the playing antelope, were simultaneously creatures symbolizing the milieu of the imaginary new western home, not only in “My Western Home.” Regardless of the symbolic impact, the animals, and especially the buffalo herds, were chased and massively killed by soldiers and white buffalo hunters (or “buffalo runners” – as they liked to call themselves) mainly for skins and meat, but also in order to starve American Indians into submission and abandonment of their nomadic ways of living. In 1872 the then Secretary of the Interior Columbus Delano clearly formulated this idea in his annual report writing that “The rapid disappearance of game from the former hunting-grounds must operate largely in favor of our efforts to confine the Indians to smaller areas, and compel them to abandon their nomadic customs and establish themselves in permanent homes” (Delano, 5). The efforts to diminish the Indian territories were in fact efforts to somehow bring them home, to make them accept the American home as their home by way of confining their freedom to move firstly to the territories of reservations and then of diminishing the reservations themselves to the area of a farm, a project clearly speaking through Delano’s report:

The policy of confining the wild tribes to smaller reservations is regarded as of the utmost importance; and carried forward to its full, extent, will result in restricting them to an area of sufficient extent to furnish them farms for cultivation, and no more. [...] So long as the game existed in abundance there was little disposition manifested to abandon the chase, even though Government bounty was dispensed in great abundance, affording them ample means of support. When the game shall have disappeared, we shall be well forward in the work in hand. (Delano, 5)

Home for Indians figures here as a diminished reservation, the work of diminishing being the function of the state which considered famine to be an important weapon of war, the extermination of the bison population constituting a crucial part of it. Though, as Alex de Waal notes, “political famines seem scarcely to register in our collective imagination” (Waal, 11), the issue seems to be relevant in thinking about the complexities of the idea of American western home not only as regards the domestication of Native Americans, but also as regards the creation of free space for white settlers who, perhaps like Indians, also wanted buffalo to roam near their new homes. What Delano called the “disappearance of game from the former hunting-grounds” in the above quotation was a part of the political project in which military

intervention was not always direct, and the actual work of slaughtering the animals was as it were delegated to the hands of hide hunters who “worked” in the name of the market rather than that of the state. David D. Smits insightfully discusses the cooperation between the army and civilian hunters on the southern plains, showing various reasons for which soldiers restrained from the massive slaughter. Yet the slaughter was strongly encouraged, and Colonel Dodge’s encouragement to extend the hunting territory beyond Kansas is illustrative of the urgency of the “buffalo problem” in the 1860s:

[A] young runner named Steel Frazier proposed that the hidemen send a delegation to Fort Dodge to ask its commander, Lieutenant Colonel Dodge, what the penalty would be if the hunters crossed into the Texas Panhandle, where they knew buffalo still abounded. The runners need not have feared opposition from Dodge, for despite his own sportsmanlike unwillingness to squander buffalo, he, like most of his comrades-in-arms, believed that the Indian problem would be resolved as soon as the buffalo were gone. Indeed, back in 1867 when Sir W. F. Butler had penitently admitted that he and his party had killed over thirty bulls on a hunt near Fort McPherson, Dodge had responded: „Kill every buffalo you can! Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone.” (Smits, 328)

This identification of Indians with buffalo was not quite rhetorical, and Smits ascribes it also to some of the soldiers who found in the killing of buffalo a substitute for the killing of Indians whose speed and mobility were frustrating, while the buffalo constituted a more easily accessible target:

Frustrated bluecoats, unable to deliver a punishing blow to the so-called “Hostiles,” unless they were immobilized in their winter camps, could, however, strike at a more accessible target, namely, the buffalo. That tactic also made curious sense, for in soldiers’ minds the buffalo and the Plains Indian were virtually inseparable. (Smits, 318)

Smits gives an example of an actual attack on a herd of buffalo in which the creatures are targeted as redskins, a scene strongly reminiscent of Don Quixote’s charge on windmills. Here is how Chalkey M. Beeson, a person hired as a guide, describes an encounter of soldiers led by general Custer with a herd of the animals:

Custer, who was in charge of the hunting party, stopped and said, ‘Boys here’s a chance for a great victory over that bunch of redskins the other side of the hill. Major B., you will take charge of the right flank, I will attend to the left. General Sheridan and the infantry will follow direct over the hill. Ready! Charge!’ (Carter, ix, quoted in Smits, 318).

This imaginary metamorphosis of buffalos into Indians is not simply a rhetorical slip revealing the projection of animality upon Indians, but a reflection

of a more complex blend of the vision of Indian animality with a prospect of their future regeneration to being Americans, a civilized and home-loving kind people whom, as yet, they are not. The living generation of Indians, like buffalo, had to be brought to near extinction within the diminishing spaces of reservations because, as Delano phrased it in his report, it is “certain that but little progress can be made in the work of civilization while the Indians are suffered to *roam* at large over immense reservations, hunting and fishing, and making war upon neighboring-tribes,” simultaneously claiming that there “is little in the past to encourage the belief that the adult Indian of to-day can be very thoroughly civilized” (Delano, 6–7, italics added). The home where the buffalo roam is thus to be a domestic space where the roaming of both Indians and buffalos is somehow held in check, a civilized and controlled kind of roaming which functions as reminder of the nearly gone wildness and freedom. The war with the roaming buffalo is thus simultaneously a war with roaming Indians, and Delano’s policy seems to be directed against roaming and unwillingness to settle down, the unwillingness which in the case of Indians was to be overcome through confinement to reservations and in the case of wild animals through the parallel gesture of firstly eliminating them as food for Indians, and then bringing the remnants back to existence in national parks and on some private areas. It is also a kind of war which is also the work of civilization preparing Indians for homely ways of living in the future. Thus in Colonel Dodge’s “[e]very buffalo dead is an Indian gone” the verb “gone” does not necessarily mean dead, but moved away from the homely territory and, perhaps paradoxically, bred as a relic of the free and wild spirit which the settlers as it were inherit as a trait of American freedom.

What makes an American home on the range really different from the home inherited through the colonial tradition is its access to wildness, to indigenous animals which, unlike game animals in England, “could not be reduced to absolute property since they were, at law, *ferae naturae*, or ‘wild by nature’” (Smalley, 2). Free, democratic access to wild indigenous animals, as Andrea Smalley argues, was posited in opposition to British class-based restrictions imposed on hunting and “served as a clear marker of American exceptionalism” (Smalley, 38). Wild animals thus constituted a challenge to the process of Anglo-American colonization and its legalities (Cf. Smalley, 6) and took part in the formation of the idea of the American home as different from the European legacy, as one surrounded, and partly inhabited, by the wildness of roaming creatures, however imaginary this free roaming may have been. American wildness, embodied not only in forests and sublime landscapes but also in indigenous animals, is seen as exceptional precisely because it carries no traces of Europe, and though through the time of colonization those traces have been partly erased, they can be recovered and revived so as to ensure Thoreau’s “preservation of the world,” a world which is clearly an authentically American world. Though the near annihilation of numerous species of indigenous animals seems to be incompatible with the Thoreauvian love for the wild, what it seems to have awakened was a certain nostalgia for the wild and the roaming, a nostalgia to breed, recreate and reproduce creatures which will, as it were, stand for the free spirit of America. This spirit somehow “wildened” American civilization for whose creation the extermination of “the monarch of the plains” was perceived only as a necessary step to pacify Indians and keep them away from the homes on the prairie. General Nelson A. Miles, one of the distinguished performers of this step in the 1870s, did

see some wastefulness of the endeavor and, years later, wrote in his *Personal Recollections* that the extermination of buffalo “might seem like cruelty and wasteful extravagance.” Yet, he explained,

the buffalo, like the Indian, stood in the way of civilization and in the path of progress, and the decree had gone forth that they must both give way. [...] The same territory which a quarter of a century ago was supporting those vast herds of wild game, is now covered with domestic animals which afford the food supply for hundreds of millions of people in civilized countries. (Miles, 135, I quote after Smits, 333).

The replacement of buffalo with cattle is seen as a sign of progress in which animals are transformed into food abundantly covering the land. What General Miles’s phrasing also performs through the idea of land’s being covered by domestic animals is their immobilization, the stoppage of roaming which is recalled in the ideal western home praised in the song. For Miles, as it seems, a home where the buffalo roam was not a perfect living space and his soldierly work in the name of civilization was done in the name of the eastern homes of Massachusetts where he was born and where he returned having done the job. Neither was the idea of a home on the range attractive to civilian buffalo hunters whose attitude is neatly expressed in numerous folk songs from that time. In “The Buffalo Skinners” version of 1873, for instance, home is the place of return and escape from the west, from “the buffalo range” to which the hunters would rather never return:

Oh, it’s now we’ve crossed Pease River and homeward
we are bound,
No more in that hell-fired country shall ever we be
found.
Go home to our wives and sweethearts, tell others
not to go,
For God’s forsaken the buffalo range and the
damned old buffalo. (Lomax, 161)

This withdrawal from the west seems to be a gesture directed against what Frederic Jackson Turner’s saw in his much discussed essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1894) as the movement defining the becoming of America. American progress was heading west in Turner, and he saw the movement of the frontier as a natural movement of civilization which he, at one point, compared to the movement of glacial moraines:

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. (Turner, 201)

A withdrawal from that movement, a look eastward – to Europe, but also to the east of America – meant to remain dependent and colonized, and Turner criticizes not only the English, but also George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison for their “desire to limit the advance of the frontier’ (224). “Even Thomas Benton,” he wrote

the man of widest views of the destiny of the West, at this stage of his career declared that along the ridge of the Rocky mountains “the western limits of the Republic should be drawn, and the statue of the fabled god Terminus should be raised upon its highest peak, never to be thrown down.” (Turner, 224)

The confinement of America to the limit of the Appalachian Mountains made up a territory fully controlled by the East, a finished and petrified state which stood against the expansive nature of the new settlers driven, as Turner phrases it, by “the demand for land and the love of wilderness freedom” which “drew the frontier ever onward” (Turner, 215). Their mobility paved the way for the truly democratic spirit which, once put in motion, returned back to the East of America and to Europe by way of undermining the “localism” of the sedentary politics of the state:

Mobility of population is death to localism, and the western frontier worked irresistibly in unsettling population. The effect reached back from the frontier and affected profoundly the Atlantic coast and even the Old World. But the most important effect of the frontier has been in the promotion of democracy here and in Europe. (Turner, 221)

The American progress is exemplary for others, and one of its important aspects may be, in the context of this text, called roaming – a tendency to change places which, for Turner, has turned into habit in the West: “Migration has become almost a habit in the West: “Hundreds of men can be found, not over 50 years of age, who have settled for the fourth, fifth, or sixth time on a new spot. To sell out and remove only a few hundred miles makes up a portion of the variety of backwoods life and manners” (Turner: 221). This oxymoronic sedentary mobility may be seen as a trace of the gone wildness of the roaming bison.

What enables such a reading is not only the fact that the presentation of Turner’s essay¹ coincided with the already mentioned near-extinction of bison whose number declined from about 600,000,000 at the end of the 18th century to 541 in 1889 and 300 in 1900, (cf. Quora). What is also marked, though somehow hidden, in Turner’s essay is that what prompted the movement away from the East was somehow initiated by buffalos. This interpretative possibility is hidden in the accessibility of salt which he saw as an important aspect of the initial localism of the East. The early settlers, Turner claims, were tied the Atlantic coast “by the need of salt, without which they could not

¹ The essay was first presented in 1893 at special meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago, three years after the American frontier was officially closed in the bulletin of the Superintendent of the U.S. Census for 1890 as an area where settlements were already too dispersed to form a line. This end of the frontier, according to Turner, also closed „a great historic movement” of American development.

preserve their meats or live in comfort” (Turner, 212)). Those who lived away from the coast traveled eastward for the supplies of salt, thus also constantly communicating with America’s colonial beginnings and learning America’s old ways and upholding her localism:

An annual pilgrimage to the coast for salt thus became essential. Taking flocks or furs and ginseng root, the early settlers sent their pack trains after seeding time each year to the coast. This proved to be an important educational influence, since it was almost the only way in which the pioneer learned what was going on in the East. (Turner, 212).

The turning point was the discovery of salt springs in Kanawaha and Holston in the west. It was then that “the West began to be freed from dependence on the coast” and the crossing of the mountains was enabled (Turner, 212). Salt was one of the attractions which transformed border into frontier, and what prompted this change was the finding of salt licks which Turner ascribes to Daniel Boone’s crossing of the Appalachians through what is now called the Wilderness Road. The event coincided with Boone’s first encounter with buffalo in 1767

when he and two companions followed a buffalo trail to the salt springs near the present-day site of the city of Prestonburg, Kentucky, where a snow storm forced them to camp. Here they learned the strategic value of a salt spring as they were able to secure all of the buffalo meat needed without hunting for it. Undoubtedly many other early hunters had a similar experience. (Collins: 151)

Salt licks and game trails which led to them were of course already well known to Indians, and Boone in fact followed Indian ways in his chase of buffalos. In his essay Turner makes a strong use of the idea of the trail in order to show that the westward movement of the American progress was inscribed in the history of the land, and Boone only “helped to open the way for civilization, finding salt licks, and trails, and land” (Turner, 213) thus initiating American participation in the process of civilization in which the advancing culture follows the traces of the predecessors among whom buffalos stand as civilization’s initiators who are posited as the originary finders of salt springs. At one point he offers a perspective upon the whole process, offering a look at it from the perspective of Cumberland Gap:

Stand at Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file – the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer – and the frontier has passed by. (Turner, 208)

The cattle-raiser and the farmer close this list, and the final result of this natural progression is the independent American home on the range for which the buffalo are but traces, perhaps the Derridean ones, of the non-American past of America as the creators of trails followed both by Indians and by the subsequent waves of pioneers. Turner repeats this sequential vision of progress

claiming that it was the Indian trade that pioneered the progress of civilization by way of retracing buffalo trails through tracing Indian trails which followed the trails of buffalo. What was thus created was a system of access to places which gradually changed into a system of transportation culminating in the construction of railroads: "The buffalo trail became the Indian trail, and this became the trader's 'trace,' the trails widened into roads, and the roads into turnpikes, and these in turn were transformed into railroads" (Turner, 209).

The home where the buffalo roam was thus a construct carrying within its image the traces of the beginning located in the natural movement of animals (deer also made use of salt licks). Though the animals became nearly exterminated, the buffalo trails and traces kept alive the spirit of wildness which haunts the image of the western home in the lines of "My Western Home," and which, slightly paradoxically, finds its embodiment in Thoreau's vision of domestic animals going west and regaining their wildness:

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 grey tide, twenty-five or thirty rods wide, swollen by the melted snow. It is the Buffalo crossing the Mississippi. (Thoreau 1862, 669)

General Custer, as we have seen, turned buffalos into Indians, seeing in their free coexistence a physical obstacle to the progress of American civilization. In Thoreau, domestic animals are turned into buffalos crossing the symbolic line between East and West, thus as it were refusing to be born to be tame. The dream of a home on the range may thus be seen as a reflection of some environmental paradoxes of wildness and civilization, of wilderness and technology, in which the desire to be born to be wild may, nowadays, also mean, as in the well-known Steppenwolf's song *Born To Be Wild*, to freely ride a motorcycle. The call to "Get your motor runnin'/Head out on the highway" does not contradict the declaration that "Like a true nature's child/We were born, born to be wild." Robert Harrison in his essay written for *New York Review of Books* on the occasion of Thoreau's bicentennial birthday quite rightly notices that the search for a "true" Americanness is inevitably bound to face contradictions and paradoxes. American "environmental conscientiousness," he writes

is outmatched only by our environmental recklessness. We are outlaws obsessed by the rule of law, individualists devoted to communitarian values, a nation of fat people with anorexic standards of beauty. The only things we love more than nature's wilderness are our cars, malls, and digital technology. The paradoxes of the American psyche go back at least as far as our Declaration of Independence, in which slave owners proclaimed that all men are endowed by their creator with an unalienable right to liberty. (Harrison, 14)

"Nature's wilderness" was becoming extinct already at the time when Thoreau went to live in the forest, and, as he put it in his *Journal* on March 23, 1856,

the extinction and extermination of “nobler animals” made America an “emasculated country,” a country in which the study of nature is comparable to the study of “a tribe of Indians that had lost all its warriors” (Thoreau, not dated, 421). What American progress has mutilated is the authentic book of nature. The original has become a translation in which even the seasons of the year are inauthentic:

I take infinite pains to know all the phenomena of the spring, for instance – thinking that I have here the entire poem – & then to my chagrin I learn that it is but an imperfect copy that I possess & have read – that my ancestors have torn out many of the first leaves & grandest passages & mutilated it in many places. (Thoreau, not dated, 422).

Nature is almost extinct and, perhaps like Walden in Staley Cavell’s reading of Thoreau, already gone: “Walden was always gone, from the beginning of the words of Walden” (Cavell, 119). Though the buffalo still roam in America, the space where they roam seems now to have been relocated to the vicinity of Fermilab, a particle physics and accelerator laboratory near Chicago, where a small buffalo herd is maintained. The buffalo are quite free there, and the advertisement addressed to potential visitors informs that “although they look placid, buffalo have the undomesticated personality of the wild.” They are also “like physicists, they have been described as ‘cantankerous’ by those who have tried to herd them” (Fermilab Bison). This affinity between scientists and buffalos brings to mind yet another near extinction, the one about which Thoreau remarked in “Walking” neatly summarizing, and perhaps also prophesizing, the puzzling ways of American progress: “There is plenty of genial love of nature, but not so much of Nature herself. Her chronicles inform us when her wild animals, but not when the wild man in her, became extinct” (Thoreau 1862, 667).

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