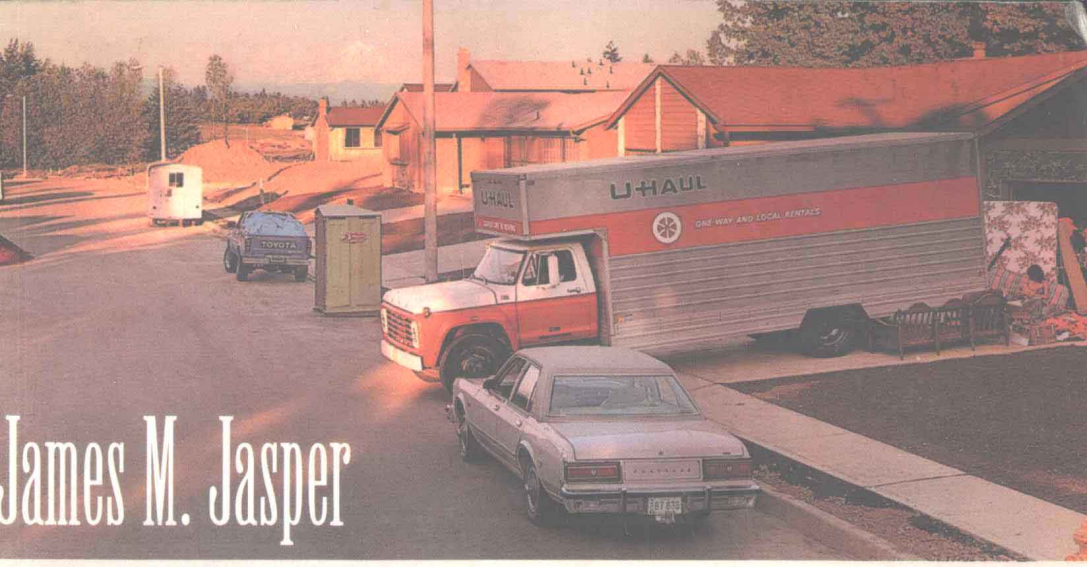

James M. Jasper

Restless Nation

Starting Over in America

JAMES M. JASPER

NATION

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James M. Jasper is the coauthor of *The Animal Rights Crusade* and author of *Nuclear Politics* and *The Art of Moral Protest,* the last also published by the University of Chicago Press.

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PREFACE

I was doing research on Americans' faith in movement when my own life forced me to weigh the risks and payoffs of relocating. I lost my job and faced the prospect of either moving to another part of the country or changing career paths. My wife and I had just married and bought a house, and we liked the New York neighborhood where we lived. My wife would have had to relocate as well, which she was willing to do even though she was flourishing in her tenured professorship at a nearby university. Many American men would have moved, either dragging their wives with them or leaving them behind. For me the choice was just as obvious: I stayed where I was, and shifted careers from professor to writer, of which *Restless Nation* is the first fruit. But in fact, I had simply played one American trump card, that of starting over, against a closely related one, that of moving. The two usually go together, but not always. This book is about the peculiarity in American character that encourages us to see moving as a solution to most of our problems.

Americans move in order to do better economically, to get in touch with the higher things in life, including their own souls, to adjust or flee their family ties, to pursue physical health, to escape what constrains them. This restlessness is especially characteristic of American men, who believe in a true inner self untouched by civilization, other people, or organized social life—a self they can move intact to a new location. Loyalty to place, like loyalty to people, feels like a trap. Yet I hope to show that restlessness can also be a trap, distorting our sense of the world around us and the possibilities it holds for us, raising expectations that cannot always be filled.

A New Yorker may seem an unlikely spokesman for loyalty to place, but that is only because of Americans' nostalgic sense that rural places are "good," while cities are treacherous. Different places have different

virtues, and New Yorkers have shown enormous attachment to their neighborhoods, sometimes their blocks. Time after time they have marched into the streets to fend off some threat to their proud communities. Identities can be developed even on the basis of being "city people." Any place can feel like home, and that's a feeling we need to cultivate. My allegiance to New York is especially strong because I have lived in a lot of other places, and eventually chose the one I liked most. This is what I will later call the "search then settle" pattern, which I see as a way of moderating American restlessness.

This is a book about national character. If you spent your life in a dark box in the cellar, you might believe there is no such thing as national character. But if you have ever watched the news, read a novel, or traveled abroad, you have noticed national traits. This does not mean that everyone in a country is identical: not every American has to be the same for there to be a recognizable "American" character. Despite their impressive diversity, Americans are, on average, different from other people. Even though they and their ancestors have come from all around the world, from a staggering range of countries, Americans tend to share a number of recognizable traits that make them American. One reason is that certain kinds of people from all around the world have come here because they thought this was the best country for people like them: a self-fulfilling belief. *Restless Nation* attempts to describe and understand those similarities of vision and character. All countries are unique, but some are uniquer than others. The United States is at the top of the list.

Essays on American character have become unfashionable in recent years. Under pressure from streamlining deans, academic social scientists have been concerned to prove that they were doing science of much the same sort as physicists and biologists. Few really believed this, but social scientists set out to mimic the methods and units of the "hard" sciences, with the result that they began to study "brains" rather than minds, "semiotics" rather than cultures, "formal organizations" rather than societies, and "bureaucratic elites" rather than politics. There was no room any more for the subtleties of character, which result from the complex interplay of psychology, culture, national institutions, and a variety of social processes. And there was no "discipline," in the new scientific division of labor, assigned to such soft things. Even those in the humanities today study texts and narratives, not the people who write and read them.

National character studies, when they were last popular in the 1950s, had a variety of flaws that made them vulnerable to "scientific" attacks.

They did not always distinguish clearly between individuals and institutions, making the latter seem like a mysterious emanation from citizens' essential qualities, or from "the land." Scholars also frequently collapsed individual attitudes and broader cultural meanings, as though they were talking about some kind of group mind with a will of its own. There was little room for disagreement and conflict within a culture, little room for individual divergence from "the" national character. Finally, studies of American character in the 1950s had an annoying air of self-congratulation. American civic culture, having saved the world from fascism, was the ideal toward which other national cultures, if they matured properly, were supposedly headed. American freedoms represented everything good.

Radical critics of the 1960s made American institutions—big business, the military, government, universities—into symbols of everything bad. The people themselves disappeared, often assumed to be inherently good but corrupted by the false consciousness of mass culture and corporate advertising. Many of these critics eventually landed jobs in universities, where they discovered that the scientific side of marxism, rather than its political and critical side, offered nice career opportunities. Neither their structural critique nor their scientific pretensions allowed much room for something as delicate as national character.

Just as it was obvious in the 1950s, if poorly articulated, that people of different nations tended to have contrasting characters, it is clear today that the majority of Americans have not been duped by big business or Richard Nixon. If they vote conservatively, it is not because they have been tricked into it or because the poor (presumed to be radical) are excluded from voting. There is something in Americans' character that leads them—as it has throughout their history—to dislike socialism, to mistrust government, to fear and despise poor people, to dislike but also admire the rich. The concern with freedoms that observers half a century ago admired is still there, but it has a dark side the boosters did not wish to see: an individualism that sees markets as just, the poor and the rich as equally responsible for their fates, and the natural environment as a resource to be used up in pursuit of our own opportunities. Americans believe that people can start over, at any time, and make the kind of life they desire. This is a powerful ideal but also a dangerous trap.

I do not view national character as comprising primordial feelings and beliefs shared by all the people in a nation, which bubble up to color all their actions and institutions. There is nothing so mysterious about what makes Americans American. We have institutions, culture, and traditions shaping us in all sorts of traceable ways. Ideas are

important, too, as in the images of the United States strong enough to motivate foreigners to travel thousands of hard miles to come here. The United States differs from other countries in several ways: the almost constant flow of immigrants, enormous natural wealth, and a history of wretched black-white relations are the most obvious. In this book I concentrate on the first two, saving the third for a later volume.

It's trendy to disparage the myth of the United States as a melting pot in which a single culture is created out of diverse immigrant traditions, but I think we do a surprisingly good job of Americanizing new immigrants and especially their children. I worry more about the kind of culture we socialize them into, one in which Americans have little attachment to either place or other people. One thing most immigrants share is a belief in America as a land of freedom and opportunity where their lives will be better, where individuals are free to forge their own destinies. "Restlessness" is my label for these beliefs, which center around physical migration as the key to material and spiritual salvation. The story of America is a story about movement.

Recent debates over immigration have either looked at its economic effects or slipped into racist overtones suggesting that people who look different must somehow act and "be" different. I trace the cultural and psychological effects of immigration as they ripple outward from the new arrivals. They teach us that the world is open to individual effort, especially in the form of starting over. For a variety of reasons, this is a lesson most Americans have absorbed, even those who have never met an immigrant (although that is hard to avoid). Ironically, some of the sharpest critics of immigration believe in a conservative individualism that is one of immigration's deepest legacies.

The same scientific movement that banished studies of national character almost destroyed geography as an academic discipline. Its characteristic intuition that place matters disappeared from intellectual agendas. If we do not ask why or how place matters to humans, we can never see what Americans might be missing in their nomadic disregard for it, what roots might mean for individuals and communities. Americans hold on to placelessness with a peculiar but proud embrace.

Every potential reader of this book must wonder, Do we need another study of American character? For reasons I hope to show, this is the language we use to discuss most moral issues, transforming them into questions about what is "truly" American, and what is un-American. By the end, I hope the reader will understand why national character is so important to Americans, and why we can never fully give up our intuition that we are different. We *are* different.

Most studies of national character single out one cause to explain everything. The obvious problem with such explanations is that they are wrong. The world is never that simple. The restless movement of Americans does not explain all our history and attitudes. But I think it accounts for a lot of them, perhaps more than any other single factor. With some qualifications and supplements, we can use restlessness to understand much of what has happened in the United States over the last four hundred years.

Restless Nation is only a first step in exploring what it is to be American, focusing on what gets people here and moves them around once here—especially men. But migration and masculinity are not the whole of American character. In a sequel, tentatively entitled *Yearning for Connection,* I hope to examine those Americans who have been more ambivalent about restlessness and the markets with which it is especially associated. Any number of American countertraditions have felt uneasy with the modern world's emphasis on change and movement, seeking either to manage the uncertainties of markets or to escape from them. Southern agrarians have lapsed into antebellum nostalgia; nineteenth-century women created a culture of domesticity sheltered from markets; a few religious traditions have claimed to find bedrock in the unseen world; many African Americans have forged a more communal culture of solidarity. Even many members of the white middle class have tried, especially through science, to find ways to manage the vicissitudes of markets. Only a few, beginning with Thoreau, have searched for a connection to the land around them.

Restless Nation contains some facts and figures. But statistical averages are of little help in understanding dreams and identities. For this we need autobiographies, novels, poems, letters, and a good deal of interpretation. We need to reconstruct those interior lives that are so important to Americans. Only one in ten Americans may be foreign born, but what a symbolic impact they have! Perhaps only one man in ten abandons his job and family to start life anew out west. But what do the other nine think about?

Almost one thousand undergraduates at New York University and Columbia endured the lectures out of which this book slowly emerged, and they deserve my deepest appreciation. One of them, Elisabeth Troni, became my research assistant until she gave in to restlessness one day. Drew Halfman took over and did a fine job of checking quotes and searching for figures, until he too went off to do field work. In the end,

Nitsan Chorev tracked down most of the photographs and tied up loose ends, also giving me commentary on the manuscript draft. The first four times I taught the course, I did so with Mark Roelofs, who helped shape the way I think about American politics and character. Nick and Bill Demas graciously shared their recollections—and a family photograph—of their father, whose story opens chapter 2. I would also like to thank Dorothy Nelkin, Wolf Heydebrand, Willie Jasso, Barbara Heyns, Juan Corradi, Alan Wolfe, Jess Benhabib, and Duncan Rice for helping to free me from the constraints of academic life so that I could pursue my own dream of becoming an independent writer. Sometimes starting over requires a push.

Mary Waters, one of the world's greatest experts on immigration, read two drafts of the book and aided me with sensible criticism and advice. On the kind of short notice only a dear friend can ask for, Chip Clarke also proved a ferocious critic, especially when it came to weak passages that needed excision. Sven Steinmo also commented on a draft. Others have read individual chapters, including Judy Gerson and the West Village Writers' Group. Once again Doug Mitchell has shown why he is a legendary editor—among other duties driving me many miles in his Dodge Caravan across dark countryside in search of good food. Robert Devens, Barbara Fillon, and Nick Murray were also both charming and helpful. Sarah Rosenfield again proved she is a brilliant sociologist and critic as well as the world's greatest spouse; my thanks for everything, including comments on yet another manuscript.

CONTENTS

Preface *ix*

Introduction *1*

ONE The Land of the Dream 17

TWO The Most Likely to Succeed 41

THREE New Places, Names, and Selves 63

FOUR Boom Land 97

FIVE The Great Lottery 127

SIX An Alien Power 157

SEVEN The Culture of Flight 186

EIGHT Fleeing the Nest 220

CONCLUSION Are Americans Ready to Settle Down? 241

Suggestions for Further Reading *255*

Notes *267*

Index *277*

Galleries of photographs follow pages 62 and 156.

INTRODUCTION

> An American will build a house in which to pass his old age and sell it before the roof is on; he will plant a garden and rent it just as the trees are coming into bearing; he will clear a field and leave others to reap the harvest; he will take up a profession and leave it, settle in one place and soon go off elsewhere with his changing desires. . . . At first sight there is something astonishing in this spectacle of so many lucky men restless in the midst of abundance.
> —*Alexis de Tocqueville*

In the most widely read of American novels, Huckleberry Finn and an escaped slave named Jim float hundreds of miles down the Mississippi River, eluding suspicious and unsavory characters along the way. Set in the 1830s, the novel features Huck's struggle with his conscience over whether to turn Jim in to the authorities. He is convinced that he will go to Hell if he does not, for all the rules of his society support slavery and condemn escape. In the end, though, this young adolescent follows his personal impulses and fondness for Jim. The community that Jim and Huck have created on their little raft, despite the occasional tricks that Huck plays on his superstitious companion, exists outside the pressures of the "sivilized" world both are fleeing. Huck and Jim are not only apart from but better than the scoundrels they meet during their odyssey, superior to the social life they observe in a peculiar setting that is part South, part frontier. At the end of the novel, Jim settles down with his wife as a free man. But Huck is still on the move, famously declaring, "I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before."[1] Tom Blankenship, Samuel Clemens's childhood companion and real-life model for Huck Finn, ended up in Montana.

In 1838, a real youth named Frederick Bailey also went on a journey, north instead of south, gaining his freedom by fleeing his native Maryland. Unlike Huck, Bailey had no moral qualms to overcome, for he clearly saw that slavery was evil. His only quandary was one of means, not ends. Some of his voyage was also by boat, in disguise as a sailor. His journey was filled with dangers, and he saw some of his companions killed for their efforts. Having changed his last name several times to avoid detection, upon settling into a new life in New Bedford, Massachusetts, he adopted the name Douglass. In reconstructing his thoughts years later, in the first of several autobiographies, he contrasted the push and pull of migration: "On the one hand, there stood slavery, a stern reality, glaring frightfully upon us,—its robes already crimsoned with the blood of millions, and even now feasting itself greedily upon our own flesh. On the other hand, away back in the dim distance, under the flickering light of the north star, behind some craggy hill or snow-covered mountain, stood a doubtful freedom—half-frozen—beckoning us to come and share its hospitality."[2]

Douglass kept moving and remaking himself. At a meeting one evening in Nantucket, when he was only twenty-three, he stood, and spoke, and was reborn as a gifted abolitionist speaker. He was soon paid to travel Massachusetts, then New England, and eventually the world to deliver his message. Although rarely at home, he moved his wife and growing family, first to Lynn, Massachusetts, then Rochester, and finally to Washington, D.C., moving through a series of bigger and better homes in each place. He remade himself in print as well, reworking the details of his life in three successive autobiographies, four if you count a major revision of the last one (they were the only books he wrote). He embodied his own message, of how a slave could become a man.

Here are two teenagers, one black and one white, one real and one fictional, one extremely mature and the other still a child. Both, however, found self-transformation through flight. Both left a society they found oppressive or evil; both expected something better somewhere else. For each of them, the journey was treacherous, full of con men and vendettas and mobs for Huck, posses, informants, and brutal punishments for Fred. In the end, each of them had to make a choice on his own, with no guidance from—in fact contrary to—society's institutions, rules, and authorities. For each, the turning point came in rejecting the organized life of society through movement. Both managed to start fresh new lives in a new part of the United States.

Huck and Fred illustrate several American traits I hope to unravel

in this book. Our most important yet personal moments often come through movement, usually propelled by some form of escape, but also drawn by some kind of dream. The rich connotations of freedom—less doubtful to other migrants than it was to Fred—get embodied in a physical place: the territories for Huck, the North for Fred, the West for other Americans, America itself for potential immigrants around the world. A trip to that place means a new, better life. Most Americans also have a romantic belief that the individual is whole and untarnished outside of organized social life—neither Huck nor Fred learned much about himself or changed significantly during his trip. Whether you seek wealth or autonomy or inner peace, you can be true to yourself only by fleeing and starting over, leaving friends and jobs and sometimes even family. Our famous American individualism arises from movement. That restless motion begins with immigration, but it affects all of us—even those who stay put. Finally, as Americans, we exaggerate—just as they themselves did—the degree to which Huck and Fred journeyed as individuals. We forget how thoroughly Jim protected and guided Huck at all times. And to shield the underground movement, Douglass in his published account skipped over the dense network of slaves and abolitionists who helped him move north as well as the wife who financed his journey. In our minds, these are stories of individuals.

The imagination was just as active in Douglass's autobiographies, in which he reworked the details of his own life, as in Sam Clemens's work of fiction. Both men drew on common American themes in order to craft what they thought was a good or representative American life. They articulated very popular dreams: *Huckleberry Finn* is the most successful American novel, and Douglass the most widely read African American writer in college surveys of American literature. But the restless lives they crafted are not necessarily good for all Americans: these are the lives of men, and very young men at that. The restless life of self-creation has had less appeal to most women, who have often laughed at their men's dreams even as they accompanied them.

Faith in movement and actually moving are not the same thing. One lies in the realm of fantasy, movies, dreams, and novels like *Huckleberry Finn;* the other takes place in the world of economics and demographics and "real life." American men tend to be restless in both ways, since the two are closely related. If you believe in starting over, you are more likely to try it. And if you do it, especially if it works out well, you will believe in it and celebrate it. Movement and fantasies of movement are

logically distinct, but we'll see how they reinforce each other. Throughout American history there have been plenty of both.

Here's my recipe for the United States. Take an enormous territory, rich with deep forests, the blackest soil, every manner of animal, vegetable, and mineral, and endless navigable rivers and coasts. Exterminate most of its native people. Then, over four hundred years, repopulate it with immensely diverse folk, from all around the globe, whose only common feature is their restlessness. They are the ones with the stamina, resources, health, and desire to get here despite immense obstacles. Many are escaping social rigidities and political oppression at home, but almost all are pulled by a wondrous image of opportunity awaiting them here. The liberties symbolized by the famous statue in New York harbor cannot be divided neatly into political or religious, economic or cultural; immigrants may strive for any manner of freedom, from all constraints, whether by law, government, business, or custom.

Once here, they don't stop moving. They continue to migrate all over this huge land. They put their families in Conestoga wagons and move to California. They toss their clothes into Dodge Caravans and go to Texas in search of jobs. They sell their belongings, fly to Hawaii, and live on a boat to get away from it all, to start over. The literal frontier, with free land for homesteads, disappeared one hundred years ago, but Americans still treat their country as a figurative frontier with resources to exploit in pursuit of their dreams. Just as they or their ancestors began their lives anew when they came to this country, Americans are willing to do it again and again until they get it right. Constraining families, unsavory reputations, bankruptcy, dead-end jobs, and oppressive social ties can all be left behind. The automobile—which was invented in Europe but found its first mass market in the United States—is the perfect embodiment of this restlessness, the most seductive means of individual movement except for those archetypal dreams where you glide along without trying—better, perhaps, since cars are enclosed spaces, little homes you can take with you, where you can play music as loudly as you want, eat dinner, spend the night, even have sex.

Samuel Clemens, for example, was on the move most of his life. The only job that held him longer than a year as a young man was one that kept him moving constantly as a Mississippi riverboat pilot. He left his hometown of Hannibal, Missouri, at age seventeen, telling his mother he would remain in St. Louis but all the time intending to go to New York. He lasted about two months in each of those cities before moving

to Philadelphia, where he stayed only a bit longer before fleeing to Washington, D.C. Then back to Philadelphia, then west to return to his family, who had themselves in the meantime moved to Muscatine, Iowa. His adventures returned him to St. Louis, thence to Keokuk, Iowa (rejoining his family, who moved almost as frequently as he), and eventually to Cincinnati. Three months there, and he was on his way to New Orleans, barely twenty-one years old. He would spend much of the rest of his life traveling the world, fulfilling his teenage vow that he would never be trapped by a place.

You can be restless, of course, without going anywhere—maybe even more so. We don't all move West. But we think about it. We reassure ourselves that we could, that we always have an escape if we need it. And we weigh this option against others. If our boss fired us or family responsibilities overwhelmed us, we could always get in the car and go. Like Huck, we could light out for the territory, whatever literal or figurative frontier attracted us. It's a fantasy—and mostly a man's fantasy—but fantasies have real effects. We believe in the possibility of fresh starts even when we don't pursue them. There's always California.

The ability to escape the burden of the past, both collective and individual, is the central dream of the modern world. Over the past several hundred years, modernizing cultures have freed individuals from all sorts of constraints: a man need no longer follow the occupation of his father; status and lifestyle too are no longer hereditary; economic innovation is respected and rewarded; we are free to choose our associates, our residences, even (some of us) our political leaders. In many versions of the modern dream, economic markets symbolize the freedom to maneuver that individuals crave. The Americas were discovered and colonized just as this modern vision of freedom was first blossoming, especially in that nation most responsible for settling North America. The English of the seventeenth century boasted of their love of freedom, in contrast to Continental despotism, and the full vision, in its most radical form, could be transplanted here. This tight fit between America's self-image and the excitement of modernity is the reason this single country has been such a powerful symbol throughout the world: of freedom for those who believe in the modern project, of evil chaos for those who fear it. From cultures around the world, America has always attracted those most interested in these modern freedoms and eager to take advantage of them. The hopes and circumstances of the country's founding continue to resonate.

There has been migration and travel throughout human history. But most of the migrations, like the one that brought humans to the

Americas fifteen thousand years ago, involved nomads in pursuit of game or refugees from starvation or war. Few had specific destinations in mind. Travel and adventure have also been celebrated in world literature, usually as a source of new information and understanding. The heroes of epics and romances went off to test themselves, but their goal was always to return home. In one of the most famous cases, home was an obsession with Odysseus, who had never wanted to leave Ithaca in the first place. (It is easier to be loyal to a place when you are king of it.) The adventures of Herakles, Odysseus, and Jason were primarily a form of torture imposed by unfriendly gods. In the picaresque novels of the early modern period, travel was part of one's education. The point was to grow and learn, but eventually to find a role for oneself in the society (and social class) one was born into. Even the Portuguese, Spanish, and other explorers who mapped the Americas and so many other places intended to return home, hopefully richer for their discoveries. International, one-way migration to start a new life in a new land was something different and relatively new to the modern world; it is the dream upon which America was founded.

The novelty of the Americas was nothing short of startling and wondrous to Europeans. They first hoped that some of the cultures here might embody a sound alternative to what many perceived as sclerotic and corrupt European nations, that the noble savages here might be more noble than savage. When the Indians proved uncooperative or opaque, Europeans began to view the new land mass as a blank slate upon which they could build their own utopian visions, new cultures which could be rationally constructed from scratch in a way that would prevent the religious wars, economic scarcities, and political oppressions of the Old World. Utopian communities, especially religious ones, have been part of American culture ever since. They have proven short-lived, however, since individual members regularly decide that they can do even better, founding a newer sect or leaving for the latest frontier. The same centrifugal impulse that leads people to found new cults then encourages them to leave those cults.

The United States has always been distinctive and celebrated for its sheer size, its sparse settlement, and its great raw wealth. But geography is not destiny. What matters is how the land and its riches are felt and interpreted through culture. Immigrants arrive with certain intentions. Americans expect certain kinds of room to maneuver, especially to start over. They are afraid of many kinds of ties and obligations, especially to place. They make certain assumptions about how individuals are related to society or how government is related to the economy.

Their individualistic worldview is encouraged by the land but not determined by it. A range of cultural signals send the same message: that individuals are in control of their lives because they can get up and move. Far from being an emanation of or adaptation to the land and conditions that immigrants encountered, this expectation was part of what they brought with them. America was a symbol in world culture before it was a destination, and its image as the land of liberty was first crafted elsewhere, out of the psychological needs of foreigners. Like many great Americans themselves, our national character is an import.

America has remained the land of the dream, capable of stirring all sorts of ambitions in those who wish to come here and those who have arrived. America's famous optimism comes from the confidence that you can always find a new place that is right (or at least better) for you, a place where you can start over on a better track. Sometimes this confidence has been reinforced by religious images of the promised land; sometimes it has been linked to a notion of historical progress and technological advance. It has frequently led Americans to try things that others would not. One result has been a vibrant and flexible economy, always changing to meet new needs, thanks especially to immigrants who are not bound to old ways of doing things.

The movement and freedom of the American dream also have their dark side. The natural environment was one of the first victims of restlessness, since few Americans grow loyal to the places they inhabit. A handful of pioneers like Daniel Boone may have adopted Indian ways, but the dominant view saw the land and its resources as something to be used up in creating a new society. For men, land was merely a means, especially of getting rich, even if it was destroyed or made fallow in the process. It was not a habitat in which to settle down permanently. With the first colonists, the entire country took on the feel of a boomtown, full of rowdy young men (and a few women) hoping to strike it rich and then move on when the soil was depleted or the gold mined. Even today, when boomtowns are more likely to be oilfields or construction sites, they feel transitory. They are filled with drinking, gambling, and violence—apparently what young men do when women are scarce. Throughout most of American history the frontier and the immigrant cities were similar in being crowded with young men hoping to make their way, visualizing their surroundings as a means to this end.

But disregard for the physical landscape is echoed by disrespect for the social, for people as well as places. There is a surprising anxiety at