# REVIEWS

# THE "SPACE" OF CYBERSPACE: BODY POLITICS, FRONTIERS AND ENCLOSURES

## Harry Cleaver

**"Women and Children First: Gender and the Settling of the Electronic Frontier," by Laura Miller. In James Brook and Iain A.Boal, *Resisting the Virtual Life: The Culture and Politics of Information*, San Francisco: City Lights, 1995.**

I was drawn to read Laura Miller's essay because I had just used the metaphor of the "frontier" in a discussion of the role of the Internet in circulating peasant revolt and was curious about her use of the metaphor. In her essay, she discusses how the assumption that traditional gender roles are simply reproduced in cyberspace might help provide a rationale for state regulation. Her point of departure is the word "frontier" in the name of the "Electronic Frontier Foundation," a well-known institution that argues for self-regulation and fights against government interference in cyberspace. She makes a number of arguments that interested me, but the one that was most germane to my own immediate concerns was her critique of the treatment of historical, geographical frontiers in American popular culture, which I read as essentially an argument about ideology. Miller wants us to think about how the old Western frontier was perceived and conceptualized in order to

get us to think more deeply about the use of the concept "frontier" *vis a vis* the Net. While I find her critique a rich and useful one, I take issue with certain of Miller's characterizations of the Western frontier, particularly the portrayal of the West as an empty space, one in which social cooperation was negligible, and one from which an escapist mythology was constructed. A close examination of indigenous histories of the West reveals very different things about the frontier, and by metaphorical extension, about cyberspace. Rather than dispensing with the frontier as a central metaphor of cyberspace, it may be more fruitful for the creators and scholars of online culture to reconsider the connections between frontiers, the market, and governments, particularly in light of the recent influx of "resistance" movements staging their struggles over the Net.

Miller's first concern is the image of the frontier as space of freedom. She writes:

> "The frontier, as a realm of limitless possibilities and few social controls, hovers, grail-like, in the American psyche, the dream our national identity is based on, but a dream that's always, somehow, just vanishing away....For central to the idea of the frontier is that it contains no (or very few) other people—fewer than two per square mile according to the nineteenth-century historian Frederick Turner. The freedom the frontier promises is a liberation from the demands of society...." (50-51)

Miller then goes on to argue that the Net is so full of people that it "has nothing but society to offer" (51). The problem with this conceptualization is that it is a very culturally biased representation of the Western frontier. It's not that Turner was wrong about population density but rather that the characterization ignores some specific social dynamics. First, (and Miller mentions this), the frontier was a "frontier" only for the European invaders; it was already inhabited by the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Moreover, as historical works on indigenous cultures have made clear, the frontier was densely inhabited, given the character of

indigenous ways of life. In societies that depend on hunting and gathering and shifting agriculture, much more physical space is required on a per capita basis than in societies based on sedentary agriculture and urbanized trade and industry. The view of the frontier as "empty" space definitely belonged only to the invaders moving West out of an increasingly urbanized capitalist society— a view that either failed to understand the indigenous culture or dismissed it as invalid.

We should also recognize that the colonization of the frontier by invaders from the East was very much a social process. The vast majority of people who "went West" did so in groups—in families, in wagon trains, by the boatload, or trainful—with the object not only of getting land, but of building and participating in new communities. The totally isolated trapper or homesteading family was the exception, not the rule. Even when farms or ranches were large, the local neighbors and town formed a social context for family activity. After the very first "settlers," the vast majority of those who colonized "the frontier" took land immediately adjacent to that which was already taken, not in the midst of some lost, pristine wilderness. The classic Western narratives to which Miller refers us have often portrayed just such sociality. The typical experience of the pioneer colonizer of the West was not of "emptiness" but of collective activity, of people working together to found new communities. When Miller writes "Unlike real space, cyberspace must be shared," she is misrepresenting the reality of the frontier in which much of the social dynamics of the Westward movement involved the sharing of space, not with the indigenous for the most part, but among the colonizers themselves.

Miller juxtaposes the "frontier" and "civilization," associating the latter with the arrival of women and children. But as indicated above, for the most part men, women, and children arrived together. The "frontier" was the frontier of civilization—its cutting edge, its invading intrusion into other people's life spaces. I find her analysis of the portrayal of the gender dynamics of many Western narratives quite accurate: the presentation of women and children as victims or potential victims, needing to be protected (and dominated) by men. But in describing and analyzing these relationships, Miller passes over to the analysis of social dynamics—especially between men and women—and leaves the whole

issue of the "emptiness" of the frontier behind.

Recognizing this social character of the movement West obliges us to rethink her view of the frontier as an "escape" from the "demands of society." The "demands of society" that immigrants escaped were not simply those of living together, but were the demands of an untamed capitalism for their life energies under oppressive conditions that often killed. When taken at a social rather than individual level, the history of the European colonization of the West generally involves a great deal of movement "away from" the hardships, repression, and exploitation of capitalism that emerged in the Atlantic basin. A great many of those who went West, whether across the ocean or across the American continents, did so because their lands had been stolen by others. That theft was accomplished to a considerable degree through processes of "enclosure" of the land in which its one-time inhabitants were driven out. This was part of what Marxists call "primitive accumulation," i.e., the genesis of new class relations based on excluding the possibility of self-determination for most people so that they would be forced to prostitute themselves in the emerging capitalist labor market. Others emigrated because the new conditions of both economic and political life in industrializing European (and then American) cities were so hard. Low wages and awful living conditions could drive families West for land. Political repression, such as that following the 1848 revolutions in Europe, also led people to seek better opportunities elsewhere. The dream of "limitless possibilities and few social controls" is certainly part of the enduring myths of the "American psyche." But the myth endures precisely because realization of the dream has demanded an open-ended social situation for which generations have fought and struggled.

My final argument with Miller is her thesis that "Unlike land, the Net was created by its pioneers." I believe that one of the appeals of the metaphor of the frontier for theorists of cyberspace is precisely this myth—and reality—of creation. In the case of the Western frontier, no new piece of the earth was created out of whole cloth. Those who went West because their own lands had been "enclosed" in the East, imposed a new set of enclosures on the land of Native Americans. It was certainly true that from the point of view of the colonizers, they created a "new land," but they

did this by transforming the land from a state that supported hunting and gathering cultures to one that supported sedentary agriculture and urbanization. The "land" of capitalist civilization was not the same "land" as that of the indigenous people. A plowed and fertilized field is not a prairie, and a town organized physically by fixed buildings is not a "camp" set up for a season by a geographically mobile tribe. For better or worse, not only was a new kind of land created, but a new kind of society. The fact that this "creation" amounted to a "destruction" from the point of view of the indigenous people does not wipe out the process of creation, it only critiques it.

"The frontier," Miller writes, "exists beyond the edge of settled or owned land. As the land that doesn't belong to anybody (or to people who 'don't count' like Native Americans), it is on the verge of being acquired; currently un-owned, but still ownable." This view of the frontier, which I take to be an aspect of "frontier" ideology to which Miller points (rather than her own point of view), clearly embodies a capitalist perspective not only on land, but on society. It is well known that many indigenous peoples had no notion of "owning" land; furthermore, the assertion of "ownership" by colonizers was one of those aspects of the frontier that made it the cutting edge of capitalist civilization.

In the few cases where the new arrivals accepted the indigenous culture's value systems and merely exercised usufruct of the land, they were examples of "going native" and could hardly be considered part of the advancing Western capitalist civilization. There were also utopian communities created quite intentionally as something different, hopefully better, than the repressive capitalism from which their founders had fled. But these were exceptions, precisely because "going West" was a social process in which people brought the acquired habits and institutions of their past with them. However much the colonizers may have been fleeing adverse material conditions, those same conditions tended to catch up with them all too quickly—precisely because they carried the germs of those conditions with them, especially "ownership."

The early pioneers of the Western frontier sought their own freedom in land enclosed from the indigenous peoples. But when they took and then claimed ownership rights, they instituted a property system in the frontier that would eventually overwhelm

them. In a few years, or a few generations at most, their ownership would be lost to other owners. Powerful railroad or mining interests would drive them out or buy them out and usurp their property in land, or bankers and suppliers would take advantage of their debts during economic downturns, foreclose, evict them, and seize their lands. Close on the heels of the pioneers of the frontier was the same class of lords of property from whom they had fled.

The same was true of the frontier artisans and merchants who helped to build the towns and set up businesses there. Libertarians often celebrate such "entrepreneurs" just as they sometimes lament the arrival of monopolistic corporations that absorb or drive such entrepreneurs out of business. But as with the farmers who staked property claims in land, such independent businessmen and women carried with them the seeds of their own downfall. Entrepreneurs, whether on the Western frontier or the electronic frontier, are caught in a double bind. They may be dedicated and inventive workers plying their skills to create something new, be it a 19th Century blacksmithy or a late 20th Century software operation. But if they seek their independence within the framework of the rules of "private property," they are forced to work within the logic of the market. While a few may survive to become powerful capitalists in their own right, most have fallen and will continue to fall before the workings of those rules and that logic—according to which the stronger capitalist drives out or takes over the weaker. The thoroughly modern version of enclosure is the expropriation of businesses by businesses. Moreover, whether they succeed or fail, all who play by the rules lose their autonomy as each "frontier" is reduced to just another integrated section of the invading capitalist economy.

This fundamental dynamic of the old West demonstrates one reason why the metaphor of the "frontier" is useful, even indispensable, for thinking about the socio-political dynamics of the Net and the rest of the information society. The metaphor has been widely used *vis a vis* the Net not only because people, working sometimes alone but always within a social fabric of interconnections, have created and settled new electronic spaces, but also because hard on their heels have come the lords of capital using all means possible to takeover, incorporate, and valorize those spaces. The subordination of the Net to commercial and industrial profit

has become the name of the game. The "dream" of "limitless pos-
sibilities and few social controls" doesn't just "vanish away"; it has
been repeatedly destroyed through corporate enclosure and com-
plementary state repression.

But just as pioneers on the Western frontier resisted the enclo-
sure of their lands or the takeover of their small businesses by cor-
porate interests, so too do the pioneers of cyberspace resist the
commercialization of the Net. Like other free spirits, the pioneers
of cyberspace can create new spaces for their own (very social) pur-
poses (pleasure, politics, etc.) as part of a process of self-valoriza-
tion that at least initially threatens or transcends existing norms of
capitalist society. Corporate capital then tries either to enclose
their spaces by commercializing them if they look profitable, or to
crush them if they look dangerous.

One increasingly important zone on the electronic frontier has
been that of the circulation of political struggles of various groups
and movements fighting against exploitation. These sub-spaces
provide opportunities not only for the experimentation with alter-
natives to current institutions but also for attacking the larger cap-
italist system. One such group is the Zapatista Army of National
Liberation whose uprising began in the mountains of Chiapas, the
southernmost state of Mexico, but whose political message has
spread around the globe through the electronic circulation of
information. E-mail, soon complemented by gopher and web sites,
both produced, and then linked, a highly effective international
mobilization in support of the Zapatistas and against the Mexican
government's attempts to belittle and attack them.

When, in the wake of the peso crisis in December 1994, the
Zapatistas were seen as threatening the interests of international
investors in Mexico, some (e.g., Chase Manhattan Bank) called for
their elimination. The Mexican government, in point of fact,
ordered an army force of 50,000 to invade Zapatista territory in
Chiapas and wipe out the uprising. (It failed.) Others in the circuit
of investment capital sought to tap the flow of information among
the networks of solidarity for their own purposes. They sought out
individuals within the Net who were involved in producing and
circulating that information and offered them lots of money to
redirect those flows to corporate investors who would pay for the
"inside scoop" about the investment climate in Mexico and points

South. The offers were refused, so this autonomous "frontier" of resistance and discussion of the Zapatista alternative continues. Had those who were approached sold out, the autonomy of the activity would have become illusory, as little by little the information being circulated became more geared to what investors need to know and less to what is needed to struggle against them.

The metaphor of the frontier allows us to understand this dynamic in a way that appreciates both the energy and imagination of the pioneers and the dangers that beset them. Criticizing the comparison of the clipper chip (which would give government the ability to eavesdrop on all encrypted computer communications) with the imposition of barbed wire on the prairie, Miller suggests that the metaphor implies a necessary surrender to fate. But the metaphor survives such critique because it evokes not surrender but resistance.

No matter how many frontiers have been taken over and subordinated, no matter how many pioneers have been forced or induced to surrendering their freedom, the metaphor lives on. It survives not just because ideology preserves the myth but because the dream lives and the struggle lives. Each time some new space and time of human endeavor is colonized and taken over by the work/profit logic of capital, there are always people who break away and create new spaces and new times where they can be freer to elaborate their own lives in the manner they see fit. The ability of capital to enclose (commercialize) or crush those new spaces is never assured. The consequences of each such confrontation remain open. And in a period in which there are an extraordinarily large number of breakaways and a multiplicity of acts of creation, the threat to the survival of the system grows and the potential to realize an array of alternatives is great. That is the excitement of any frontier, and that is the reason the metaphor survives.

## NOTES

This essay was extracted from "The 'Space' of Cyberspace: Body Politics, Frontiers and Enclosures" which was first posted in November 1995 on the Internet list Chiapas95 devoted to the Zapatistas and the struggle for democracy in Mexico. The original can be found in the Chiapas95 archives at URL:

http:// www.eco.utexas.edu/Faculty/Cleaver/chiapas952.html
An illustrated version can be found at URL:
http://www.lawyernet.com/members/jimfesq/wca/22/SPACE-
OFCYBERSPACE.html

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