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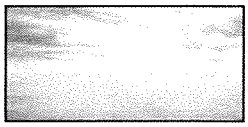

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THE NATION

The American Wanderer, in All His Stripes

By MICHAEL POWELL

That an air of the enigmatic attends Barack Obama is a commonplace; he is a man of fractured geography and family and wanderings.

He came of age in far corners, Indonesia and Hawaii, went to schools on both coasts and landed in Chicago, where he had no blood tie. With talent and ambition, he has leapt for the presidency at a tender age and will go to Denver to claim his Democratic nomination for the office.

There is to Mr. Obama's story a Steinbeck quality, like so many migratory American tales: the mother who flickers in and out; the absent and iconic father; the grandfather, raised in the roughneck Kansas oil town of El Dorado, who moves the family restlessly, ceaselessly westward.

The American DNA encodes wanderlust ambition, and a romance clings to Mr. Obama's story. The roamer who would make himself and his land anew is a familiar archetype.

And yet to describe such a man as rootless, as some people do, can stir up more questions, and an ambivalence reflected in the answers. What is rootlessness anyway? The word connotes something both celebrated and feared. Early on in Mr. Obama's time in Chicago, the Democratic machine types would ask of this preternaturally calm young pol: Who sent him?

That question, probing and suspicious, has tendrils extending deep into our history. Again and again in American culture, the rootless outsider becomes an insider, and begins to guard his prize.

First he has to find that prize. For four centuries hope and despair pushed immigrants to these shores. Royalist Cavaliers found in the Virginias a new hierarchy. Puritans spread insistently across not always fruitful lands of New England. The Highlands English and Scots no sooner landed in Philadelphia in the 18th century than they lit out for the hills of Pennsylvania and down the mountain ridges of the Appalachians. In their sackcloth and baggy trousers, they were unceremonious and warlike wanderers.

"When I get ready to move, I just shut the door, call the dogs and get started," is a Highlands

saying transposed to a new world. The historian Frederick Jackson Turner argued in 1893 in his influential "Frontier Thesis" that the key to American vitality could be found in this relentless, drifting movement.

But always newcomers rubbed against the settled — cattlemen battled farmers, one immigrant wave greeted the next with suspicion.

Primal American story though it is, rootlessness offers many variations.

There is the low-caste outcast, Huck Finn, working his way down the Mississippi. Huck's story begins even as the quintessentially American novel ends: "But 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."

And there is the ambitious wanderer aware that reinvention lies east or west of home. So F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby — Jimmy Gatz to those who knew the grafter as a farmboy in North Dakota — inhabits a mansion on the North Shore of Long Island, where he is dapper, handsome, cosmopolitan and elusive. That none of this ends well, that he ends floating face down in a pool as the narrator, Nick Carraway, returns to the Midwest, matters little. Here, in extremis, is the American urge to remake oneself.

Rootlessness gets more complicated when African-American history is unpacked. Blacks experienced two fundamental migrations: in chains to the New World, and years later, pushed by the racist and economic harshness of the post-Reconstruction South, on railcars moving northward to a great rim of industrial cities. The "Bound No'th Blues," Langston Hughes termed it.

(Mr. Obama's family tale is distinctive in that it owes nothing to that migration. His African father returned to Africa. The reverse migration is not uncommon; perhaps half of the Italians who landed at Ellis Island returned to Europe.)

The migrations never stop. Even today, 2 in 10 households in the nation move every 15 months to two years — a restlessness unique among the people of a developed nation.

"Unrootedness is, and always has been, part and parcel of being American," Arnold Rampersad, a professor at Stanford University and biographer of Ralph Ellison and Hughes, said in an e-mail message. "It is the flip side of perhaps the defining aspect of Americanness, the capacity of its citizens to reinvent themselves."

Nonetheless, it is often suggested that Americans desire a lodestar rather than a wanderer in their leaders. The Democratic strategist Mark Penn advised Hillary Rodham Clinton, an Illinoisan by

way of Yale, Arkansas, Washington, D.C., and now Chappaqua, N.Y., to emphasize her down-home Midwestern roots during the primary, the better to contrast with Mr. Obama.

And some presidents do reinforce this notion. Lyndon B. Johnson drew power from Texas, as Jimmy Carter did from his Georgia peanut farm. Bill Clinton studied at Oxford but tended to his Arkansas roots. He claimed Hope as hometown, although it was worldly Hot Springs, with gambling and delights of the flesh, that shaped him.

But many presidents are shallow-rooted trees, even if they're rarely perceived as drifters; far more often, "transplant," with its connotation of re-rooting, is the unthreatening label they take on.

Ronald Reagan grew up in Tampico, Ill., wandered to Iowa and fell in as an announcer with the Chicago Cubs before heading to California. There he built one of the more enduring political personas of the 20th century. George W. Bush, Texas twang though he boasts, attended a blue-blood prep school in Massachusetts and summered in Maine, where the waters are chilly and the culture tight-lipped. Dwight Eisenhower was born in Texas, moved to Kansas and came to call Pennsylvania home. Herbert Hoover spent his 20s laboring in the outback of Australia and then China. Teddy Roosevelt strapped on a six-shooter and moved to the Dakotas, the better to fashion an image as the "cowboy" president, even though he was as New York as they come.

Abraham Lincoln, the prototypical Illinoisan, was born in Kentucky and grew up impoverished in Indiana. He moved often as an adult, a loner before fate set him right.

Even the log cabin might be seen as a symbol of transience; the stone house speaks to wealth, permanence and belonging, and as often as not comes later. "Alexis de Tocqueville said Americans start building a house and leave before the roof is built," said the historian Eric Foner of Columbia University.

Failing to strike out for unknown parts was sometimes taken as lack of gumption. To remain in a New England town square or a sun-baked cotton town in Oklahoma was to risk soul death. "And I made myself a promise when I was old enough to run, that I'd never stay a single day in the Oklahoma Sun," Johnny Cash sang in "I Never Picked Cotton."

None of which is to argue, precisely, that Americans are at peace with the rootless.

To drift in and out of settled society, to test its mores and laws, unsettles many. Most forbidding are the strangers who come riding out of the dust: Billy the Kid, the Dalton Brothers, Bonnie and Clyde. They are nihilistic and unanchored and, when they venture into society, they often end up killing or dead or both.

But the footloose wanderer venturing outward also risks much. "Call me Ishmael" in "Moby-Dick"

is one of the great openings in American literature; the seafarer renames himself for the outcast son of Abraham, just in time for a wild and prophetic voyage. "Some years ago," the narrator writes, "having little or no money in my purse and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world." Ishmael will be the lone survivor.

Cormac McCarthy follows his noble drifters, to terrible ends. "Easy Rider" might convince anyone to smoke the joint at home and leave the motorcycle in the garage. Johnny Cash sings "I Never Picked Cotton" with a propulsive beat but with his last exhale his protagonist prepares to swing in the gallows.

It is enough to leave one wistful for the cotton fields.

"You might say Americans are conflicted within themselves," said Andrew Delbanco, a professor of American studies at Columbia University. "There is a long and often sentimental tradition of celebrating the small town" — Andy Griffith's Mayberry — "as the right kind of place to grow up and become morally solid."

At the same time, Mr. Delbanco notes, there is "a no less strong tradition of regarding the small town as airless and imprisoning."

In the 1940s and 1950s , such tensions bobbed on the surface of American culture. In Washington, officials worried about how to resettle millions of young men returned from the spectacular violence of World War II. But young Beats like William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac celebrated the underground and anti-conformist wanderer.

The fear of the feral wanderer took cinematic flesh in "The Wild One" in 1953. "What are you rebelling against?" "What've you got?" responds Marlon Brando, leather jacketed, sensual and menacing.

Perhaps rootlessness is less troubling than we imagine in a national politician; certainly it has staged a bipartisan march in this election. Senator John R. McCain, the presumptive Republican nominee, is the military brat who attended more than a dozen schools as his father, an admiral, moved about. The candidate, in "A Charge to Keep," describes the effect of such wanderings: "First made a migrant by the demands of my father's career, in time I became self-moving, a rover by choice. In such a life, some fine things are left behind, and missed. But bad things are left behind as well."

Mr. Obama offers a duality in this regard. He might be seen as chasing after roots. As a young man, he sought out precinct captains and ministers and tenants, and convinced the suspicious locals to teach him the ways of Chicago. He is married and never divorced, two children, a

resident of the Midwestern city for two decades.

"Obama is the least mobile candidate in the race," says Alan Wolfe, a professor at Boston College. "He's almost single-minded about that."

There is, too, the sneaking suspicion that describing Mr. Obama, multiracial and multiethnic, as rootless could become a surrogate for something darker. In American history, whites accused Indians of rootlessness before dispossessing them. Jews and Italians, Socialists and anarchists: all stood accused of being "the other."

"My sense, for what it's worth, is that the charge of 'rootlessness' is suspect, and has an ugly genealogy," Mr. Delbanco said.

And yet Mr. Obama can fan the flames of his elusiveness. He talks of how Americans of many viewpoints see themselves in him. He passes months on the road, and has the restless intellect and detached eye of the author.

"The next U.S. president is going to be Ishmael, whether we like it or not, and whether he knows it or not," said Mr. Rampersad, the Stanford professor. "Fortunately, both McCain and Obama know that they are Ishmael."