

Cormac McCarthy, Violence, and Borders: The Map as Code for What Is Not Contained

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The West and boundaries are almost synonymous. Boundaries elicit images and thoughts that can be associated with a history of violent conflict in terms of national border disputes, land appropriation, and territorial development. The demarcation of land throughout American history, and the product of its demarcation—the map—have been coded in different ways. Produced by the conqueror, colonial, or imperial authority, the map contextualizes space and constitutes certain directives about how that space is understood in specific and discriminatory terms.

Cormac McCarthy's novels acknowledge the traditional role of maps and their boundaries. In his work, however, maps also contain essential knowledge other than what the viewer assumes they contain. In other words, while traditionally the map functions to present knowledge to the viewer, I argue that in McCarthy's novels, maps contain other codes, histories, and truths that are outside of, and sometimes in opposition to, the viewer's desired knowledge. Maps reinforce a process of division between native inhabitants and unspoiled lands on the one hand, and under the guise of progress, imperialism and colonialization on the other. One of the ways maps formalize space is through demarcating boundaries. Boundaries can be construed in a physical sense, as in land forms such as rivers and mountains. Or boundaries can frame space in a metaphysical sense in terms of subjectivity, desire, or cultural history. In this discussion, I pursue boundaries as a modality of subjective and spatial containment that is constructed *on* the physical map, but whose importance lies *in* the map's metaphysical avoidances, repressions, and denials. I will examine maps, and the boundaries maps contain, in McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road* to determine how his novels reinforce the importance of mapped objects and images, but more importantly, how McCarthy's texts debunk the presumed knowledge the map contains for other meta-spatial and cultural knowledge that McCarthy's characters fail to recognize. His novels redefine the traditional view of the map as a source of knowledge, and instead, the assumed knowledge the map contains is rewritten and subverted for other knowledge that the viewer of the map is unconscious, or is unwilling, to recognize.

While physical boundaries determine spatial elements on a map, as, for instance, roads and rivers are natural borders, these geospatial elements fail to inform or decode the space for individual utilization. The map viewer desires knowledge about space, but that knowledge extends beyond spatial location. It is the meta-spatial rather than intra-spatial information that exists beyond boundaries and containment that most often goes without recognition. And the failure to recognize knowledge existing outside of the liminal boundaries of the map, in McCarthy's novels, both acknowledges and undermines the tradition of the map as a device of progress and exploration on one hand, and imperialism and solipsism on the other.

The specificity of the map as a method of containment is represented by ambivalent and abstracted images in McCarthy's novels. McCarthy problematizes

traditional images of boundary with the immateriality of its surface and meaning. McCarthy's West is not defined by absolute boundaries. If boundaries keep something contained and demarcate something other, maps and boundaries efface codified space and collapse strict physical interpretation by their intertextuality, history, and cultural production. In *All the Pretty Horses*, the terms of bounded space are redefined by their ambiguity: "The candleflame and the image of the candleflame" (3), "Horses and the breath of horses" (3), and "Nation and ghost of nation" (5). These phrases, set out in the first few pages of the novel, characterize the nature of physical mapping, for these images represent the material and their immaterial counterpart where the concrete image is lost in the self-reflexive immateriality of its opposite. As a means of signaling spatial ownership and ethnic priority, bounded space and maps contain the violence of imperialism and its continued desire for more acquisition.

In written form, maps formalize and secure boundaries, and separate space in political, geographical, and social terms. Rather than an end product, maps represent an historical process where native or indigenous spaces are appropriated, recreated, or destroyed, or where objects mapped are effaced from existence altogether. The judge's sketching in *Blood Meridian* represents a similar process of destruction and recreation. Some scholars, such as David Holloway and Neil Campbell, have examined this dynamic. While the objects the judge draws and destroys—shards of pottery, a piece of Spanish armor—contain one kind of knowledge about its own contextuality and history, the map is inherently a tool that reveals the codification of various "landscapes."¹ The map not only is a product of its own cultural hegemony but it also contains and presents knowledge that is different or perspectival, racially or ethnically exclusive, or is opposed to what the viewer desires in his examination. In Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Melville writes of Queequeg's origins, "It is not down on any map. True places never are" (79). The map does not provide, in Melville's terms, knowledge of "true origins," but represents a violent process of production and consumption. Melville's text, but more specifically Ahab and the *Pequod*, exemplify an earlier moment in American letters concerning the romantic quest whose foundation is based upon imperial conquest. Melville's novel, in this sense, foreshadows John Grady Cole's and Lacy Rawlins's enterprise in *All the Pretty Horses*, which I shall explore below.

From Indian scouts leading mountain men through hunting and trapping grounds, the Lewis and Clark expeditions, railroads dividing huge regions of the country, to the construction of fences marking individual or corporate territories (an image, for instance, captured at the end of *Blood Meridian*), maps recorded the processes of the frontier's continual change, and imaged how it was defined and transformed both synchronically and diachronically. In Frederick Jackson Turner's classic treatise of the West, the progressive development of wilderness to civilization is a positive one. There is little contemplation of the specific means by which the wilderness is domesticated and populated, and this is seen as a desirable process. Turner writes, "At first, the frontier was the Atlantic coast" (3). It advanced "up the Atlantic River ... crossed the Alleghanies into Kentucky and Tennessee ... then by 1820, just beyond Ohio, southern Indiana and Illinois" (3). Turner characterizes the empty space beyond the frontier line as becoming "American" only with progressive advance. The objective of the transformative advance was not what was beyond the line, but how the space behind the frontier boundary

became transformed, or Americanized. The land beyond was empty, and thus was not recreated but created for the first time.

Much time has been spent throughout American literature and American letters in discovery, analysis, and evaluation of what progress was in the West, how it could be imaged, and what it meant to the notion of American identity and history. Henry Nash Smith's idea of a "middle ground" posited a more transitional geography within Turner's bilateral model. The space between wilderness and civilization is conceptualized by a third space—an agrarian region. This space, Thomas Jefferson believed, was America's destiny in terms of prosperity, happiness, and American livelihood. He imagined and helped construct an American identity as one of American agriculture that would lead to prosperity both in financial and spiritual terms. As it turned out, the push of civilization across the middle West to link the coasts was one of the factors that led to greater resource extraction, population growth, and greater market supply. Agrarian Social Theory became part of America's story even while progress, industry, Indian displacement, slavery, and manufacturing and trade centers worked against this theory simultaneously, often in the same regions where Agrarian Social Theory was believed existing.²

There is an oppositional consciousness when conceptualizing boundaries, maps, and space, for space, and specifically, western land, is desired both for its vastness and its economic potentiality while at the same time, the mapped space is a function of its containment, demarcation, and colonial appropriation. This dichotomy can be represented in terms of a pastoral mythology v. industrialization, or limned as surface against depth where surface is an emotional response and depth a space's economic potentiality. A. Carl Brendahl characterizes space in terms of surface:

The imagination of the American West ... finds essential value in surface because surface is at the heart of the western experience... But the western eye regards surfaces as neither hollow nor artificial. Distant from eastern structures and challenged by the big sky, the westerner finds himself accepting the landscape and indeed embracing it for physical and spiritual sustenance. Even the most imposing of surfaces—the landscapes of eastern Utah or the Dakota badlands—seem to share a vulnerability with man while at the same time offering a visible stability impervious to the temporality of his threescore and ten. (30)

Cole and Rawlins in *All the Pretty Horses* fail to understand the larger context of culture and history contained intratextually in the map. Instead, they believe that their innocent pursuits can be determined by the course of geographical delineations and physical plotting. Cole and Rawlins consult a map they pick up at a café while on the early part of their journey to old Mexico, but what they are looking for cannot be deciphered. We can characterize the process of deciphering information *from* the map as the difference between what is *on* the map and what is *in* the map. Objects on the map, printed, or drawn, are representations of landforms. What is in the map is the information Cole and Rawlins are unable to decode about the historical, cultural, and intertextual processes of its production. The American-made map represents Cole and Rawlins failed

understanding of another culture and their unknowing reinforcement of American imperialist ideologies:

They reached the Devil's River by midmorning and watered the horses and stretched out in the shade of a stand of black willow and looked at the map. It was an oil company roadmap that Rawlins had picked up at the café and he looked at it and he looked south towards the gap in the low hills. There were roads and rivers and towns on the American side of the map as far south as the Rio Grande and beyond that was all white.

It don't show nothing down there, does it? said Rawlins.

No.

You reckon it aint never been mapped? (34)

Two important points are illustrated by this passage. First, the map was published by an oil company (a motif McCarthy returns to later in the book) representing how the space that contains the nostalgic life Cole desires is a production of resource and commodity conglomerates. In terms of traditional ideas about American progress and history, both Rawlins and Cole perceive Mexico only through its relationship to America. The American map does not inscribe Mexican territory with identifications, and thus, Mexico is imaged as an absence. Rawlins and Cole fail to recognize the Mexican people and a prior Mexican history as separate from an American history that has little to do with their romantic idealizations of it. In this way, they occupy the position of the colonialist or imperialist who travels, what Patricia Limerick calls "the traveler." She defines the American expansionist who assumes the mantle of the traveler: "The dominant motive for moving West was improvement and opportunity, not injury to others. Few white Americans went West intending to ruin the natives and despoil the continent" (36). This characterizes Cole's and Rawlins's track south as well. In geographical, ecological, social, and cultural terms, I conceptualize the West to be inclusive of a larger geographic region defined by culture and climate rather than political boundary. This area includes the southwest of America as well as the northern region of Mexico.³ The demarcation of boundaries on the map, and their indications of cultural separation, can be interpreted as arbitrary and imperialistically produced. Certainly Cole and Rawlins did not believe their desires were nefarious, but their intentions were ultimately framed within an already existing imperialistic paradigm. Their failed understanding of the map code does not reveal the truth of culture nor of geography, but rather, the map construes an already existing pattern for Rawlins and Cole to remap the space in imperialistic terms. These terms are shrouded and costumed in what Daniel Cooper Alarcón references as the "Infernal Paradise Tradition."⁴

Several pages later, Rawlins asks Cole what he thinks everyone back home is doing. Cole responds, "Probably struck oil" (35). This sardonic response, referring back to the oil company map, is a dismissal of their previous life, yet it suggests not what Cole's thoughts are of his friends, country or old life, but instead that he and Rawlins are on their own mission to "strike oil." To interpolate the terms of American capitalism, resource extraction and native exploitation represent Cole's own desire to remap the space south of the American border, to recreate the white space in his own terms. In fact, after the boys are employed by Don Hector and Cole's love object, Alejandra, is

identified, Rawlins asks, “You got eyes for the spread?” (138), not only imaging Cole’s sexual desire for Alejandra in physically suggestive terms, but also portraying Cole’s material desire for the whole hacienda itself. This relates Cole’s “eyes for the spread” to American resource extraction and the capitalism of “striking oil.”

It is in this basic premise that Rawlins’s and Cole’s troubles originate: their misunderstanding of the white space on the other side of the map. Richard White writes about the psychological perception of space, its transformation in history, and its physical representation: “By the nineteenth century western North America was represented conventionally on maps as largely empty and unknown. But earlier maps, those of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, for example, had portrayed a densely occupied continent teeming with people” (17). Traditionally, when one looked upon a map of America in the eighteenth-century, the strongest feature was its empty space. In each successive decade, the frontier advanced and was incorporated within a new border. Leo Marx writes, “The first principle of the American ideology of space derives from the initial European impression of the boundless immensity and seeming emptiness, or ahistorical character, of the New World” (63). This same ideological stance constructs Cole’s and Rawlins’s understanding of space. As further analysis of the historical record has shown, the colonialist perspective ambiguates truth rather than reveals it. It is through those that narrate (Native Americans, Mexicans, women) from the “blank space” on the map that a fuller picture can be realized.

Beyond geography is Rawlins’s and Cole’s failed understanding of Mexican history, ethnicity, social structure, and law. Cultural differences extend beyond geographical cues and are often not contained by them. Cole and Rawlins believe that they can pass borders without consequence while their travels project (imperialistically) their American culture. This enterprise attempts to violently redraw the space south of the border in the boys’ own image. To this end, however, Dueña Alfonsa explains to Cole: “One country is not another country” (145). This articulation is Alfonsa’s demand for Cole to keep to his boundaries. When Blevins completely draws Cole and Rawlins into a complex dance of culture and social division, violence is the epicenter between desire and cultural stability. It is a natural reaction to protect cultural boundaries, and one that is a predicted response for the imperialist. Within “stable” cultural relations, violence can erupt at any moment when historical feuds resurface or confrontations with the ethnic or cultural other transgresses space and culture. As Edward Said noted, “Environment and regional conflicts ... can mobilize passions atavistically, throwing people back to an earlier imperialism when the West and its opponents championed and even embodied virtues designed not as virtues so to speak but for war” (37). Cole’s violent agency compensates for his lost sense of entitlement while the Mexicans reactively defend their cultural subjectivities to maintain the ethnically divisive spatial boundaries Cole is unaware of or insensitive to.

Transgression of boundaries without cultural sensitivity catalyzes violent reaction. In essence, if the space beyond the map and south of the border cannot be understood without the processes of imperialism or corporate ideology, then Cole and Rawlins should have stayed north. There is something down there; they just do not know what it is. Their conceptualization of space, from north to south, rather than inside the “white” area looking out, sets into motion actions that imply imperial presence rather than “going native.” This results in the unleashing of violent action and reaction. Cole and Rawlins

fight daily for their lives at the penitentiary at Saltillo though they fail to realize that they themselves are the catalyst for the violence they incur. McCarthy characterizes the violence in the penitentiary by using the language of American imperialism and capitalism: “Underpinning all of it like the fiscal standard in commercial societies lay a bedrock of depravity and violence where in an egalitarian absolute every man was judged by a single standard and that was his readiness to kill” (182). The space Cole desires contains the hacienda and the romanticism its represents as well as the violence of the penitentiary. Cole and Rawlins believed they could have one without the reality of the other.

In McCarthy’s *The Crossing* boundaries, and the knowledge desired from locating boundaries on the map, code the meta-spatial and cultural knowledge Billy and Boyd Parham fail to realize. Boundaries are ignored, for both brothers believe that the natural (and cultural) world is without boundaries. But by ignoring geopolitical spaces, Parham is hardly prepared to comprehend the violence that destroys the she-wolf. Parham crosses the American-Mexican border several times, demonstrating that the boundary fails to contain movement. After capturing the she-wolf near his family’s home (as the wolf had crossed the border from Mexico to the U.S.), he decides to return her to the mountains in Mexico. The disparity between open land—Mexico—and the strictly defined geopolitical boundaries of the U.S. are made clear: “Late afternoon they [Parham and the wolf] passed through the last low cones of hills on that volcanic ground and an hour later they came to the last fence in the country” (63). Parham’s idealism in returning the she-wolf back to nature belies his ignorance of what the boundaries he crosses mean. Before he can complete his task, the she-wolf is taken from Parham by Mexican riders who “had U S Government 45 automatics pistols in black leather holsters hanging from their belts” (95). Parham’s idealism is rejected both by the Mexican riders who take the wolf from him but also by the U.S. government, as represented by the riders’ weapons. One maps space with the “arms” of imperialism rather than idealism. Parham tracks the she-wolf to a gambling and dogfighting arena. His objective is to free the she-wolf from an artificially created violence—a violence created by man for sport. Parham’s idealism is subjugated by the truer space occupied by Mexico’s native inhabitants that is not romanticized or idealized. Though the she-wolf is a source of knowledge all men have forgotten, Parham does not see that the native inhabitants are living their own normal lives, not an idealized, romanticized life, and violent gambling games are part of it.⁵ Mexico has its own cultural boundaries and containments absent on any map Parham has access, or the ability, to decode.

It is not only Parham’s misunderstanding of mapped spaces but also the she-wolf’s lack of knowledge of boundaries that facilitates her gruesome death and signals the spiritual death of Parham. McCarthy infuses the wolf with a kind of anthropomorphic consciousness in that we get the sense the she-wolf understands to some extent the problem of boundary, but she refuses to acknowledge them. In crossing natural boundaries from one region to another, neither animal nor man is without responsibility. All space is mapped by someone. In the natural world, animals map space territorially. The she-wolf, a victim of man’s desire to eradicate competition to domestic stock, may in fact be responsible for her own destruction, thus undermining the pathos of Parham failing to physically save her:

He could feel the wolf lean against his leg. He said that the tracks of the wolf had led out of Mexico. He said the wolf knew nothing of boundaries. The young don nodded as if in agreement but what he said was that whatever the wolf knew or did not know was irrelevant and that if the wolf had crossed that boundary it was perhaps so much the worse for the wolf but the boundary stood without regard. (119)

Ironically, it is the hacendado that suggests to Parham that the wolf should have known its boundaries better. “What he said was that whatever the wolf knew or did not know was irrelevant and that if the wolf had crossed that boundary it was perhaps so much the worse for the wolf but the boundary stood without regard” (119). Parham’s better understanding of political boundary might have somehow prevented the she-wolf’s death. The natural world is no longer a world without boundaries. In the artificial conditions of gaming rather than the more pure violence of natural survival, the she-wolf’s death might have been more heroic rather than utterly defeated. The American literary tradition has examples of total destruction without total defeat. I can think of Ernest Hemingway’s *Old Man and the Sea*. Redemption or salvation through utter defeat is one thematic element McCarthy does not adopt here.

The Crossing is a novel full of boundaries and the transgressions of those boundaries. In fact, the title itself names the act of transgressing those very boundaries that separate and define geography and culture. However, McCarthy represents the map as something less than resolute. The map is represented as one of individual perspective and creation rather than as a way of communicating geographic or political knowledge. Billy and Boyd Parham are in Mexico seeking their stolen horses. Their parents had been murdered and the horses stolen, yet rather than seeking vengeance for their parent’s death, they seek their property, which has a greater symbolic resonance to them than their parental loss. The sense of loss and desire for recovery of the past is a stronger focus. This thematic enterprise is one that McCarthy’s characters are consistently engaged with, as is the overall sense of the “West” as disappearing from the modern age. Seeking direction, the boys watch an old man draw a map in the dirt:

They sat on the ground in the dusty square while a thin old man squatted opposite and drew for them with a whittled stick a portrait of the country they said they wished to visit... By the time the old man was done the map he’d drawn covered an area in the dirt the size of a blanket. He stood and dusted the seat of his trousers with a swipe of his flattened hand. (184)

Billy and Boyd seek knowledge of the landscape, which the old man supplies, but another man watching the map maker comments, “He said that what they beheld was but a decoration. He said that anyway it was not so much a question of a correct map but of any map at all... One needed to know the country itself and not simply the landscape therein” (185). The map scene demonstrates that the knowledge desired from the map is not the knowledge they need to survive. In fact, Boyd will be killed by vaqueros who are recapturing the horses Billy and Boyd steal back from them. Moreover, the commentator of the dirt map says,

That in any case a bad map was worse than no map at all for it engendered in the traveler a false confidence and might easily cause him to set aside those instincts which would otherwise guide him if he would but place himself in their care. He said that to follow a false map was to invite disaster. He gestured at the sketching in the dirt. As if to invite them to behold its futility. The second man on the bench nodded his agreement in this and said that the map in question was a folly and that the dogs in the street would piss upon it. (185)

The man's comments on the old man's map illuminate the false nature of maps. This contradicts the desired knowledge Billy and Boyd seek out of it, and more importantly, the larger cultural production of map making. In *All the Pretty Horses*, there is no question of accuracy in the map Cole and Rawlins use because it is an "oil company map" made by an American corporation. But in this instance, maps in *The Crossing* demonstrate that desired knowledge assumed to be contained on the map is knowledge imposed by the map maker; thus, the concrete (factual) knowledge the American boys desire from the map is superseded by the experiential history of the old man who draws the map. Finally, the map itself as physical artifact is one of fragility and transiency. The viewer of the map is engaged not in a one-way process of gathering information, but in a personal and dialogic interaction with the map maker himself, whether present or not. Instead of a static, written guide, the map becomes a kinetically changing document whose production is problematic. The map is written in the dirt, and in a moment's time, could be totally wiped out without any trace. It is problematic to define scratches in the dirt as a "written" document, though obviously it is not oral. The argument made in Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* is an interesting contrast to this in-between object. The written document, in Ong's view, is one of authority: it cannot be refuted (for the author is often absent), it can be duplicated, and it exists because of a certain achieved level of technology. The dirt map's fragility, in this case, suggests the potentially immediate effacement of any knowledge one could (with)draw from the map, and further, represents that each traveler, in effect, is their own map maker, and must make their own map. *The Crossing* adds new dimensions to McCarthy's undermining of the map's authority and questions the validity of assumptions about what the map contains.

In *No Country For Old Men*, violence effaces all boundaries, and in Chigurh's words, "And then one day there is an accounting" (57). Boundaries and maps account for space, to organize it in a way that is useful for immediate decoding, and to contextualize the viewer within the mapped regions so one does not become lost. One way that we can characterize the novel is that it outlines the (failed) process about recovering from being lost. Boundaries in *No Country* are effaced through violence, and the mapped regions that separate Main Street from a violent underground are amalgamated. When Llewelyn Moss comes back to the motel where he is hiding, he knows someone has been searching, or is present, in his rented room. He must find another room to survey his original location. He says to the motel clerk:

I need another room.

You want to change rooms or you want another one besides the one you've got.

I want to keep the one I got and get another.
All right.
Have you got a map of the motel?
She looked under the counter. There used to be a sort of one. Wait
a minute. I think this is it.
She laid an old brochure on the counter. It showed a car from the
fifties parked in front. He unfolded it and flattened it out and studied it.
(99)

The “map” Moss views shows a period of innocence, before his involvement in Vietnam and before, in Girardian terms, the overwhelming violence in which Moss is immersed.⁶ The information on the brochure implies a return to this innocent American nostalgia rather than reflecting the truth of Moss’s predicament. Finding another space to occupy while one of his pursuers has displaced his original space is a metaphor for Moss’s failure to understand the violence that has already been mapped. In addition, the map illustrates the disparity between a desire for return and to re-establish oneself within a familiar space with a contradictory desire to venture into new spaces. In other words, Moss attempts to recover spatial contextuality. In Chigurh’s philosophical musings, “You see the problem. To separate the act from the thing. As if the parts of the some moment in history might be interchangeable with the parts of some other moment” (57). The motel map reveals both a lost temporality and the inability to account for the violence that effaces boundaries and spatial liminalities. As an object of information, the map fails to confer desired knowledge.

Maps, in McCarthy’s *The Road*, are both a code for the failure of imperial agency and a returned of the repressed. They reinterpret lost, violent, apocalyptic trauma that does little to inform spatial relationships in the present. *The Road* utilizes maps as an image to code violence rather than function to reveal information one originally desires the map to define. Violence has made borders and boundaries irrelevant in the post-apocalyptic world of *The Road*. *The Road*’s world is filtered through the trauma of the past where signs are reconfigured to symbolize the rift between the denial and desire of traumatic memory. *The Road*, like McCarthy’s other novels, reinforces and subverts historically defined and deeply rooted notions of the map as an artifact of containment and boundary.

The Road, though set in a nightmarish future, recalls a tradition of landscape and boundary in the novels of the West. In many ways, *The Road* can be considered a “post-nuclear” western, for it relies on man’s relation to space, maps, and boundaries (including survival against climatic elements and general privation), law is a function the individual (and its reliance on guns), and the novel plots a quest where the characters are defined by “good and bad” guys. Boundaries and maps are a form of enclosure, what A. Carl Brendahl calls a “protective aspect” (7). *The Road* construes a violent tension between the desire for enclosure in a physical sense—protection from the elements, a truck the father and son sleep in, the descent into the Edenic bomb shelter—against the anxiety of containment from a violent history and the constant threat of another kind of physical containment—captivity. This disparity creates a disjunctive and alienating tension.

Discarded and useless artifacts from the “old days” refer to the violence that altered their original function. Signs of the old way of life are scattered about,

representing both a need to forget and to reinforce what was lost. Images like the “last” Coke the father and son find, credit cards, and road maps represent the lost *object*. The signs from the past are constant reminders of an earlier violence. While “[the father and son] followed a stone wall.... Shapes of dried blood in the stubble grass and gray coils of viscera where the slain had been field dressed and hauled away. The wall beyond held a frieze of human heads, all faced alike, dried and caved with their taut grins and shrunken eyes” (77). This is clearly seen in the “oilcompany roadmap,” the guide the father uses to navigate what once were states, a geopolitical designation now nugatory:

Why are they state roads? [the son asks.]
Because they used to belong to the states. What used to be called states.
But there’s not any more states?
No.
What happened to them?
I dont know exactly. That’s a good question. (36)

The map’s organization of space and the father’s reliance upon it reflects an old world schema before the violence changed those signs into something different. “Then one day he sat by the roadside and took it [the map] out and went through its contents. Some money, credit cards. His driver’s license” (43). While the father sheds the accoutrements of a pre-apocalyptic world, those objects serve to signal the change in experience from one period to the other. They are tokens that reflect traumatic memory and its processes.

The road had once been a function of containment, an element of boundary. Now, it is a physical entity that is part of the scarification, or wound, of the landscape rather than a path towards a desirable end goal. As a fluid boundary, the father and son must deviate from it to either escape “roadagents” or to find the several caches of food they discover. Neither structuring containment or direction, the road is an open space of epistemological interpretation. “In two days time they came upon a country firestorms had passed leaving mile on mile of burn. A cake of ash in the roadway inches deep and hard going with the cart. The blacktop underneath had buckled in the heat and then set back down” (160). Towards the end of the novel, they come across “mile on mile” where the road has buckled from the nuclear heat. If, as I have argued, the experience of the map maker is intrinsic in the map itself, in *The Road*, the map maker (or at least the origins of its production) is certainly dead; thus, the dialogic interaction and interpretation between the present and the past is absent of reliable and useable information.

In the context of a post-nuclear world, basic images of containment that had once been harmless in a pre-apocalyptic world now evidence nuclear causality. For instance, the son desires to see a dam. The son is interested in the sights and objects that no longer have function in their world. But more than that, the dam is a device that alters the landscape, placing boundaries on natural bodies of water that were originally contained by other natural boundaries. The purpose of the dam had once been to alter the course of the water, to force it through turbines to create electricity. The altering of natural boundaries exemplifies the overall problem of re-containing and re-contextualizing

natural environments which evidences the larger experience of nuclear destruction. The son asks,

Can we go down there and see it?
I think it's too far.
Will the dam be there for a long time?
I think so. It's made out of concrete. It will probably be there for
hundreds of years. Thousands, even.
Do you think there could be fish in the lake?
No. There's nothing in the lake. (17)

The past markings on the material map code a knowledge about why the world was destroyed.

The father examines his road map periodically, trying to determine distance, direction, and destination in a land where the space has been utterly reshaped. The father "sat studying the twisted matrix of routes in red and black with his finger at the uncton where he though that they might be. As if he'd see their small selves crouching there" (73), and "The boy was sleeping and he went down to the cart and got the map and the bottle of water and a can of fruit from their small stores and he came back and sat in the blankets and studied the map" (165). The map does not bestow current or credible information in the post-nuclear conditions. Near the end of the novel, it is apparent the truth of space, direction, and context cannot be deduced.

In fact, each act of examination in the expectation of ascertaining knowledge of space from the map is instead a disconnect between the desire for spatial knowledge and contextuality on one hand and the father and son's existence in a post-nuclear world on the other. Not seeing the desired information on the map, the father literally draws information, instead of *withdrawing* it, on a phone directory map, as if to create a new framework to contain the truth of their present position: "[The father] found a telephone directory in a filling station and he wrote the name of the town on their map ... They were some fifty miles west of where he'd though. He drew stick figures on the map. This is us, he said" (153). The father and son's course is to the coast, although there is no certainty that the coast will provide a better existence. The father thinks, "Everything depended on reaching the coast" (25). The novel plots their trek towards the coast, and when the father and son reach it, the boy "stood in the road holding the map ... [the father] could see the disappointment in his face. I'm sorry it's not blue" (181). The map was supposed to show them a space where survival was possible. The blue sea was an image of hope and sustenance. Instead, the images at the end of their journey are a summation of the complete destruction, violence, and death seen earlier in the text. The map no longer contains the truth of space, but instead represents a memory of the original violence. Ultimately, the map is a dead cultural artifact, for there is no where to go, no place the map can show them.

Borders and boundaries have always played an important role in defining the West. The map is a tool that contextualizes space and locates the viewer within it. But there are a host of other processes entailed in map reading aside from spatial location. McCarthy's novels offer a critique of the map as a source of information and as an authoritarian account of western progress, development, and historical containment.

Knowledge desired from a map is more about what is in the map rather than what is on it. The map embraces a long historical and literary history as a tool for exploration, appropriation, and knowledge; however, each of McCarthy's novels use the map to at once contain, then transcend containment through violent processes couched in the language of romantic idealism, evasion, and hopeful resolution, and construes knowledge as one of experience and perspective rather than absolute truth.

Notes

¹ In Campbell's discussion of McCarthy's western novels as both western and anti-western, he asserts that through the judge, recorded history is "a process of selection and control" (218).

² I am referring to the classic treatise by Thomas Jefferson in "Notes on the State of Virginia" and continuing scholarship on the subject by scholars such as Henry Nash Smith.

³ I would define the West according José David Saldívar's discussion of U.S.-Mexican borderlands as a "third country," one that is neither Anglo nor Mexican but a combination of both.

⁴ Daniel Cooper Alarcón surveys the traditional account of U.S.-Mexico perceptions in literature and history. The U.S. perceives Mexico between two different perspectives: a pejorative reality and a mythologized/idealized one. He calls McCarthy's Mexico (speaking specifically of *All the Pretty Horses* but also noting *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*) "a symbolic backdrop, juxtaposing the paradise of the hacienda with the hell of the prison at Saltillo" (144).

⁵ According to Wallis Sanborn, "The wolf is a warrior animal of honor" (131). The transgression of its honor and man's lack of honor is evidenced by the brutality the wolf is subjected to in the game fighting scene. The wolf, historically seen as a cunning warrior by some Native American tribes, is vilified by Europeans and American settlers alike. Following Sanborn's discussion, the absence of the wolf in southern New Mexico represents man's predation and overall practice of domestication and eradication of the natural world.

⁶ According to René Girard, without the intervention of a justice system, which takes the responsibility of punishment out of the hands of the victim or victim's family, overwhelming violence is a condition that exists when the punishment against a perpetrator never equals the original crime, and thus, violence escalates and continues between parties that become more distant from the original subjects and their relations.

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