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“Justified in the World”: Spatial Values and Sensuous Geographies in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*

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In contrast to the conventional division between “early” and “late(r)” works, the development of Cormac McCarthy’s oeuvre is typically described in geographical terms, with critics subsuming his first four novels under the heading “Appalachian Works” and his subsequent novels under the title “Western Works”. Far from merely constituting a convenient categorising or framing device, these positional terms reflect an increasing concern with space and place in McCarthy’s novels.² In this article, I address spatial concerns that are specific to McCarthy’s 2006 novel, *The Road*, demonstrating how the protagonists’ desire for positionality and directionality is both heightened and hampered by an apocalypse that has reduced the world to dust and ashes.

Like many of McCarthy’s previous works, *The Road* employs mapping motifs to explore the distinction between *space* and *place*, and to represent protagonists’ struggle to both master and move through space. In the post-apocalyptic world of the novel, however, maps are associated with a visual, abstracted and purportedly objective understanding of space that is shown to be both illusory and wholly inadequate.³ In place of traditional cartography, *The Road* asserts a more holistic human or *sensuous* geography, a manner of constructing space that highlights the interaction (and interdependence) of the human body and its surrounding land, rather than the dominance of the former over the latter.

“Justified in the World” – Mapping Morals

The Road is but one of McCarthy’s many road narratives; his previous novels and the many tales embedded within them are characterised by the movements of their respective protagonists, which vary from flights to quests, from aimless wanderings to the active pursuit of goals which vary in their degree of attainability and morality.⁴ Perhaps more than any previous protagonists, the unnamed “man” and “boy” of *The Road* appear to be endowed with a singular purpose and direction: “They were moving south. There’d be no surviving another winter here” (4). Like many of the traditional divisions by which humanity orders the world, “winter” has become a rather notional term in a land caught in the cold and calcined aftermath of an unexplained (but presumably global) catastrophe, in

which the nights are “dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before” (4). Despite reassuring his son that they will “be warm” once they move southwards and asserting that “everything depended on reaching the coast”, the man struggles with the knowledge that “all of this was empty and no substance to it. There was a good chance they would die in the mountains and that would be that” (25). Suppressing these doubts regarding the prospect of their southern salvation, the man continues to insist, “We have to keep moving. We have to keep heading south” (36).

The man and boy’s desperate quest is directed and given a semblance of “substance” by a map that becomes a potent symbol of the spatial problematics in the novel: The tattered oil company roadmap had once been taped together but now it was just sorted into leaves and numbered with crayon in the corners for their assembly. He sorted through the limp pages and spread out those that answered to their location. (36)

The gradual disintegration of the map is a reflection of its decreasing ability to serve as a means of understanding and negotiating space. The lines, names and symbols on the map refer not to the blasted and borderless landscape across which the man and boy move, but to a social and political order that has long since disappeared. As the man informs the boy, the black lines on the map represent “state roads”, so called because “they used to belong to the states. What used to be called the states” (36). Nevertheless, the map continues to provide a degree of reassurance for the travellers, particularly in the wake of their many traumatic or disorienting encounters with others on the road. The next reference in the novel to the map follows the man’s apparent abandonment of a “little boy” that his son sees (or imagines he sees). Ignoring his son’s plea, the man seeks instead to distract and console the boy with an image of their position and progress:

At a crossroads they sat in the dusk and he spread out the pieces of the map in the road and he studied them. He put his finger down. This is us, he said. Right here. The boy wouldnt look. He sat studying the twisted matrix of routes in red and black with his finger at the junction where he thought that they might be. As if he’d see their small selves crouching there. (73)

Projecting himself and his son onto the surface of the map as imagined “small selves”, the man betrays a desire for positionality that cannot be alleviated by reference to anything in his surrounding landscape. Indeed, the ashen amorphousness of this very landscape both triggers and exacerbates the man’s spatial anxieties. The man and boy consult the map

with even greater desperation later in the novel when they find themselves far from the coast with dwindling supplies and hopes:

They were some fifty miles west of where he'd thought. He drew stick figures on the map. This is us, he said. The boy traced the route to the sea with his finger. How long will it take us to get there? He said.

Two Weeks. Three.

Is it blue?

The sea? I dont know. It used to be.

The boy nodded. He sat looking at the map. The man watched him. He thought he knew what that was about. He'd pored over maps as a child, keeping one finger on the town where he lived. Just as he would look up his family in the phone directory. Themselves among others, everything in its place. Justified in the world. Come on, he said. We should go. (153-4)

The man's progression from imaginary projection to graphic inscription reflects his escalating disorientation and spatial anxieties, and the increasing importance of the map in alleviating these fears. The map represents a world of social and spatial order, a known and knowable space where "everything [is] in its place".

The equivalence of human and spatial order is further enforced by the line "Justified in the world". The multiple meanings of the term "justified" suggest a state in which one's existence and actions are respectively corroborated and condoned by others, and one's spatial position is correct or exact. Consequently, the protagonists of *The Road* look to maps and phone books (abstracted images and printed texts) as emblems of a moral and spatial order that is indiscernible in the anarchic post-apocalyptic world through which they travel. However, such representations of order and harmony are both wholly inaccurate and wholly inadequate, as the man's fight for survival drives him to commit deeds which prove difficult to justify. Although the man remembers himself and his family "among others", his struggle to exist in a post-apocalyptic world leads to an unfeeling self-interest. Constantly vigilant, the man actively avoids encounters with travellers on the road, ignores the plight of others and exacts ruthless (and sometimes seemingly disproportionate) revenge on those who threaten or steal from them (56, 216). Such actions blur the tenuous moral boundary that the man draws between "the good guys", a category that consists of himself and his son, and "the bad guys", a grouping that includes not only the bands of cannibals from whom they narrowly escape on several occasions, but also others who merely seek the same resources that they do.

“Upright to what?” – Spatial Values and Absent Centres

The gradual dissolution of the map in which the man and boy see themselves reflects not only the disappearance of the putative spatial and human order that the chart represents, but also the inadequacy of the visual and abstracted forms of negotiating space upon which it is based. The opening of the novel likens the ever-encroaching darkness of the post-apocalyptic world to “the onset of some cold glaucoma slowly dimming away the world” (3), a description that recalls the themes of blindness of McCarthy’s earlier novels. The most overt and sustained treatment of blindness is found in *The Crossing*, in the tale of the revolutionary who loses his sight when his eyes are sucked from his head by a German captain of the federal army. The revolutionary’s ordeal saves him from execution, but sentences him to a sightless fate that initially seems worse than death:

The bonds that fixed him in the world had become rigid. Where he moved the world moved also and he could never approach it and he could never escape it. He sat in the roadside weeds in the rain and wept. (McCarthy, *The Crossing* 279)

The revolutionary’s fear that he can neither “approach” nor “escape” the world arises from a common human tendency to map space in almost exclusively visual terms. In *The Road*, similarly, the man’s tenuous sense of space and order is continually threatened by a vertiginous spatial and moral void that is encoded in terms of blackness and blindness:

The blackness he woke to on those nights was sightless and impenetrable. A blackness to hurt your ears with listening. Often he had to get up. No sound but the wind in the bare and blackened trees. He rose and stood tottering in that cold autistic dark with his arms outstretched for balance while the vestibular calculations in his skull cranked out their reckonings. An old chronicle. To seek out the upright. No fall but preceded by a declination. He took great marching steps into the nothingness, counting them against his return. Eyes closed, arms oaring. Upright to what? Something nameless in the night, lode or matrix. To which he and the stars were common satellite. Like the great pendulum in its rotunda scribing through the long day movements of the universe of which you may say it knows nothing and yet know it must. (McCarthy, *The Road* 13)

The disequilibrium that the man experiences in this passage demonstrates the dominance of the visual in the human experience and mapping of space. As the human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan notes: “[the] organisation of human space is uniquely dependent on sight”, with the other senses serving to “expand and enrich visual space” (Tuan 16). Although the apparent dominance of sight is a “natural” element of the human experience of space, the valorisation of the visual in modern cartography leads to an increasing abstraction of and distancing from the world. Exploring mapping motifs in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy, Robert L. Jarrett notes that mapping necessitates “a transcendently detached perspective”, one that requires “the separation of consciousness from the exterior world” (Jarrett 119-20). Similarly, Paul Rodaway argues that:

Landscape and map [reduce] the visual experience to exclusively visual symbols—in the case of landscape, excluding the visual from its nesting within the matrix of other sensuous experiences and establishing a practice of detached contemplation, and the transition, in the case of maps, from picture-like representations to schematic representations, a system of signs—and abstraction in the sense of detachment of visual worlds (or representations) from the actual visible world—the breakage of the sign-reference link, the replacement of representation by resemblance; that is, an order of simulation. (Rodaway 159)

In *The Road*, the map becomes a potent figure of the postmodern order of simulacra, images without depth, dimension or reference. In the aftermath of the novel’s apocalypse, language has become “shorn of its referents and so of its reality” (75). The same is true of the map that the man and boy consult with almost obsessive desperation – the ordered borders, towns and other icons have no “referents” in the real world, but exist on its surface only.

As with his childhood scanning of maps and phonebooks that assure him he is “justified in the world”, the man’s search for “the upright” points to the human encoding of ethical value in spatial terms. This search for spatial certainty is an “old chronicle”, and is described in terms drawn from classical physics: “the great pendulum in its rotunda scribing through the long day movements of the universe”. Employed by the French physicist Léon Foucault to demonstrate the rotation of the earth, the “great pendulum” is emblematic of the search for Absolute Movement and Absolute Space. In Isaac Newton’s formulation, Absolute Space remains similar and immovable without relation to anything external: it is the fixed “background” against which the motion or position of objects are

measured (Rynasiewicz). In McCarthy's text, Foucault's Pendulum operates as a metaphor for the human search for spatial fixity and permanence. Whether tottering in the dark or gazing at the ceiling of the rotunda, the protagonists of both novels evince the same desire: to locate a fixed point in the universe that would provide spatial – as well as religious or scientific – certainty.

For Newton, Absolute Movement and Absolute Space are “real entities with their own manner of existence as necessitated by God's existence (more specifically, his omnipresence and eternity)” (Rynasiewicz). This belief, however, is untenable in the wake of various experiments that disprove the presence of a “motionless ether”, the most devastating of which is Einstein's demonstration that the speed of light is constant regardless of “the motion of the observer and the motion of the source of light” (Rynasiewicz). As Stan Gibilisco notes, “Relativistic physics proves that absolute time, as well as absolute space, are illusory” (Gibilisco 184). Consequently, in *The Road*, Foucault's Pendulum figures as an anachronism, as a symbol of a time when belief in absolutes, both spatial and spiritual, was both possible and apparently provable. If there is a “Mover” in the novel's universe, it is “Unmoved” only in its indifference to the sufferings of humanity. Light, Einstein's only constant, is notable by its absence, as “the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp” (McCarthy, *The Road* 28). In this world, “the upright”, in either its spatial or its moral meaning, is something that can be defined not in terms of absolutes, but only of relativity.

Since neither God nor the natural laws of the universe provide McCarthy's protagonists with fixed spatial or moral certainties, they are forced to draw on more contingent, fluid and human indices of spatial position and orientation. This human or sensuous geography is not secondary to Newtonian or cartographic figurings of space, but rather precedes them: the term *world* “contains and conjoins man and his environment, for its etymological root ‘*wer*’ means man” (Tuan 34-35). Tuan argues that the human body “does not merely inhabit space, but commands and orders it through intention”; the body is “lived body” and space is “humanly construed space”. In his study of the spatial vocabularies of various cultures, Tuan demonstrates that “humans project life's values onto the space they inhabit”, and that these values are “ultimately derived from the structure and value of the human body” (37). A person assumes “full human status when he [or she] is upright”, and the word “stand” is the root for a cluster of words, including “status”, “stature” and “statute”, which all imply “achievement and order” (Tuan 37). Consequently, the man's search for “the upright” and the ensuing question, “Upright to

what?”, can be resolved only by reference to his body and the values derived from it. In a land of chaos, darkness and dwindling resources, the man’s actions cannot be judged by any abstract or fixed standard of morality, but are, rather, “justified” by the bodies that he must feed, clothe and protect. These basic bodily demands lead the man – and the reader – to (re-)consider looting, murder and selfishness as the hallmarks of the “upright”, the ends-justified means of the last man standing.

A sense of the “upright” is essential not only for constituting space but also for negotiating it. As Tuan observes,

Upright man is ready to act. Space opens out before him and is immediately differentiable into front-back and right-left axes in conformity with the structure of his body. Vertical-horizontal, top-bottom, front-back and right-left are positions and coordinates of the body that are extrapolated onto space (35).

To command space and feel at home in it means that the objective reference points in space, such as the cardinal positions, conform with the coordinates of the human body (35). In *The Road*, however, even such fundamental reference points are useless in the face of the disorienting horrors that the man and boy encounter. Searching for food in the cellar of one of the numerous houses they pass on the road, the man instead discovers a number of naked men and women, including “a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burned” (93). Ignoring the prisoners’ pleas for help, the man drags his son from the house just as the cannibalistic captors are returning to entrap them. After lying for hours in the woods within earshot of the house, from which “hideous shrieks” emerge, the man finally risks moving under the cover of darkness, only to discover that he has no sense of where he is going:

He’d no idea what direction they might have taken and his fear was that they might circle and return to the house. He tried to remember if he knew anything about that or if it was only a fable. In what direction did lost men veer? Perhaps it changed with hemispheres. Or handedness. Finally he put it out of his mind. The notion that there could be anything to correct for. His mind was betraying him. Phantoms not heard from in a thousand years rousing slowly from their sleep. Correct for that. (98)

Like the terms “upright” and “justified”, the word “correct” carries both a spatial and an ethical significance, suggesting fixed standards to which people can align both their behaviour and their bodies. However, the anarchic world of *The Road* provides no such centres or certainties, and the act of walking in circles is a manifestation of a mind that is

forced to negotiate the earth without a moral compass. The man's ill-fated attempt to escape the consequences of his actions (or inaction) evokes a scene from McCarthy's second novel, *Outer Dark*, in which the protagonist Culla Holme attempts to abandon a baby born from his incestuous relationship with his sister. Holme takes the child deep into the woods and leaves it there to die, but after stumbling through the trees in the darkness, he finds himself back where he started, confronted by his offspring, the irrefutable proof of his deeds (McCarthy, *Outer Dark* 5-18).⁵ McCarthy's men flee from the consequences of their actions (or inaction) but find themselves spatially and morally lost; this disorientation is neither plottable nor predictable, and cannot be "corrected" by recourse to any fixed point in space or morality.

"They smelled of moss in your hand" – Sensual Spaces

Traditional cartography serves as an index not only of the dominance of the visual in the human experience of space, but also of man's capacity for abstraction and detachment. As Jarrett notes, this ability "reaches its fullest expression in the transcendental reason of Kantian philosophy, with the reason's requisite empowerment in the midst of its alienation from the world" (120). McCarthy's protagonists "are lost because of this gap between the world and its representations, whether in mathematical, graphic, or verbal languages" (120). With the waning of visual, scientific and other "objective" means of charting space, the protagonists of *The Road* must turn to a more intimate human or sensuous geography in their efforts to map the world, past and present. This move mirrors the turn, or return, in recent geographical theory to "a kind of sensual study, both intimate in its focus on the information of the senses – touch, smell, taste, hearing, sight – and also wider ranging, inclusive not just of the visual dimension of experience, but also the other senses" (Rodaway 4). As Paul Rodway explains in his book-length study on sensuous geography, human senses serve both as "*a relationship to a world*" and as "*a kind of structuring of space and defining of place*" (4).

In *The Road*, the gradual movement from an abstracted and predominantly visual experience of the world to a more intimate and holistic sensory understanding of space is evident in the passage cited above, where the man struggles to maintain his balance in a blackness that is "sightless and impenetrable", a blackness "to hurt you ears with listening" (13). The synaesthesia of these descriptions points to the man's multi-sensory experience of space, reinforced by the subsequent reference to the "vestibular calculations" in his inner ear, which help him maintain a sense of balance (however

tenuous) in total darkness. The growing importance of a multi-sensory mapping of space becomes evident later in the novel when the man explains to the roadagent he is holding at gunpoint why he will not be able to hear the shot that will alert his companions:

Because the bullet travels faster than sound. It will be in your brain before you can hear it. To hear it you will need a frontal lobe and things with names like colliculus and temporal gyrus and you wont have them anymore. They'll just be soup. (55)

The man's grim humour – telling a cannibal that his brain will soon be soup – and his denial that he is a doctor provide only a temporary distraction from his clinical detailing of the man's cerebral anatomy. Without a frontal lobe (whose various functions include motor control), colliculus (which receives information from the eyes and other sensory systems and creates a topographic map of the surrounding space) or temporal gyrus (which process auditory information), the roadagent would be, quite literally, deprived of his senses and thus unable to either construct a world or locate himself in it.

The surgical precision with which the man details the contents of his enemy's sensory system not only reflects his unshakable calm in the face of danger, but also points to a process by which the world is unmade through the removal of various human sensory experiences. Such sensory deprivation afflicts the man himself, threatening to strip his memories and dreams of the “vanished world” of their power to preserve and comfort:

He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning to wake himself from just such siren worlds. Lying there in the dark with the uncanny taste of a peach from some phantom orchard fading in his mouth. He thought that if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory. (15-6)

In a world where all vegetative life has been extinguished without hope of renewal, and where all orchards are mere “phantoms”, the taste of a peach is unreal and “uncanny”. Taste has become utilitarian, serving to determine the safety of what scant supplies of food and water the man and boy can locate. It is only when they stumble upon a bunker stocked with “crate upon crate of canned goods” that the man and boy experience the “richness of a vanished world”:

The man thought he had probably not fully committed himself to any of this. You could wake in the dark wet woods at any time. These will be the

best pears you ever tasted, he said. The best. Just you wait. [...] They sat side by side and ate the can of pears. Then they ate a can of peaches. They licked the spoons and tipped the bowls and drank the rich sweet syrup.

(119)

In spite of its sensory delights, the bunker is at best an ambivalent space, an industrial Eden whose goods can be consumed but not renewed. The seemingly countless cans of “[t]omatoes, peaches, beans, apricots” and other preserved goods unearthed by the man evoke the “collection of fruitjars and bottles with glass stoppers and old apothecary jars” discovered by Billy Parham in a wolf hunter’s cabin in *The Crossing* (17). These jars contain “[d]ried viscera” which the hunter preserves and combines to recreate the scents by which the wolf constructs and navigates its world. This ploy is so successful that “the little room with its chemic glass” resembles “a strange basilica dedicated to a practice as soon to be extinct among the trades of men as the beast to which it owes its being” (17). The subterranean storeroom of *The Road* is a similarly “strange basilica”, and its numerous preserved goods, like the dried viscera of the endangered wolf, reveal that in seeking to master, mimic or preserve nature, mankind merely destroys it. Since he was born in the aftermath of the apocalypse, the boy has never eaten fresh fruit, so the best peaches and pears he has ever tasted and can ever hope to taste are relics from a culture that has commodified and consumed nature. This same culture has prompted people to build bunkers to alleviate their (apparently well-founded) fears of an apocalypse.

While the future of the man and boy’s sensory world seems to be largely dependent upon the dwindling leftovers of a consumer culture whose alienation from nature has become total and irreversible, the past continues to provide a space in which the senses and the world interact with and impact upon one another. In one of the daydreams that follow from his dream of a “phantom orchard”, the man recalls a scene with his wife from the vanished world:

He could remember everything of her save her scent. Seated in a theatre with her beside him listening to the music. Gold scrollwork and sconces and the tall columnar folds of the drapes at either side of the stage. She held his hand in her lap and he could feel the tops of her stockings through the thin stuff of her summer dress. Freeze this frame. Now call down your dark and your cold and be damned. (17)

With the exception of smell, the man's memory of his wife invokes all of his major senses, providing it with a vividness and richness that stand in opposition to the cold and dark that would otherwise consume him.

While the sensuousness of the man's memories appears to offer only a frail and fleeting defence against the darkness and sensory deprivation of the apocalyptic world that surrounds him, the novel closes with a scene whose visual, aural, olfactory and haptic richness provides the reader with hope or, at the very least, a warning:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing that could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.

(241)

The image of the brook trout is one of the man's most visited memories of his childhood, and is described by the narrator twice in earlier sections of the novel. Consequently, it is possible to interpret these lines as an act of *prosopopoeia*, that is, as a vision of a vanished world that is summoned through an act of imagination or an act of memory in the mind of the boy following his father's death. Alternatively, the lines could be read as the last fleeting glimpse of a natural order that cannot "be put back", and thus as the narrative's apostrophic appeal to the reader to engage with the world in a way that will prevent the ecological apocalypse that has been described in harrowing detail throughout the novel. Replacing the visual mapping and abstraction that leads to the devastating distancing of humans from the world, the sensuous geography of McCarthy's post-apocalyptic calls for the individual's engagement with the world and realisation of his or her place within it.

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² As Jay Ellis demonstrates in his seminal study, *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*, all of McCarthy's novels address "in different ways and at different levels", tensions between "freedom and security, lawless space and confining space"; these various spatial conflicts "not only coexist, but also connect with one another" (Ellis 10).

³ The emphasis on, and ambivalent encoding of, space and place in McCarthy's works reflect what Brian Jarvis describes as "the central role that geography plays in the American imagination and the way in which that geography bifurcates towards utopian and dystopian antipodes" (Jarvis 6). Jarvis further notes, "Many of the key terms in the discourses of American history and definitions of that nebulous entity referred to as national identity are geocentric: the Frontier, the Wilderness, the Garden, the Land of Plenty, the Wild West, the Small Town, The Open Road" (6). As I will demonstrate, such geocentric terms are supplemented by words that refer to and emanate from a more immediate, intimate and corporeal experience of space.

⁴ For more on the various types of journey undertaken by McCarthy's protagonists, see Robert L. Jarrett's *Cormac McCarthy* (Jarrett 63-4, 97-8).

⁵ The replaying of this scene in *The Road* suggests McCarthy's revisiting of his earlier fiction, a return that is not merely thematic but also, more importantly, spatial. Unlike McCarthy's late (or Western) works, which relate geographical locations and journeys in minute detail, *The Road*, like *Outer Dark*, creates a fictional space that is ill-defined and fabular, a space that is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere.