## "What the Hell Is a Flowery Boundary Tree?" *Gunslinger, All the Pretty Horses* and the Postmodern Western

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What is the function of a map, and what role does mapping perform in a literary text? This essay interrogates the use of maps and mapping, the influence and impact of capital and the construction of nationhood, and considers what it means to be an American in Cormac McCarthy's *All The Pretty Horses* and Edward Dorn's *Gunslinger*. The argument links the project pursued in these two westerns to larger geopolitical issues, whilst fully addressing the specificity and difference of the texts and their individual forms, structures and contents. Postmodern geographical theory is applied to the two books to provide a new theory of the way that land and territory are employed in the western.

There is no such thing as a border, and national identity is a myth propounded by white-supremacist, capitalist societies in order to support a system founded on competition. Land is only land: it has no intrinsic values other than those which are assigned to it externally, according to an artificially developed human code. This code bears the same relationship to the reality of the land it names, and claims to represent, as do the lines on a map that are supposed to represent the intricacies of civilizations. Writing that is concerned with maps is therefore concerned with the conflicting questions of identity and representation – and a book that claims, as the title of Cormac McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* (1998) implies, that it represents a particular place must also be concerned with the problem of language as a sufficient code to communicate the meaning, the nature, of that place. As Edward Dorn writes in Book I of *Gunslinger*:

Questioner, you got some strange Obsessions, you want to know What something *means* after you've Seen it, after you've *been* there.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Edward Dorn, *Gunslinger* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989), 29, original emphasis.

Embedded in this quotation is the key discussion of this paper: how are places and geographical phenomena used to generate meaning? What assumptions do we, as readers, make from the setting of texts, how are they constructed, and what use do we put them to? This kind of discussion, about the nature of place and our understanding of it can be encompassed by the umbrella term "psychogeography," which was originally defined against geography as we commonly understand it by French situationist theorist Guy Debord:

Geography, for example, deals with the determinant action of general natural forces, such as soil composition or climatic conditions, on the economic structures of a society, and thus on the corresponding conception that such a society can have of the world. Psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.<sup>2</sup>

When Debord wrote this, he was beginning to define psychogeographical processes and the concept of the *dérive*, or "drift," whereby an individual forges their own relationship to a city, and so defines that city-space. The space may be strictly delineated by its streets, but the place is essentially purposeless, to be defined by the chosen movements of the individual. Michel de Certeau, another key pioneer of psychogeographical theory, wrote, "Place is practiced space" – defined in our ideas and emotions by the uses we put it to, pluralizing the natures of a city according to the number of individuals who live there.

Psychogeography as it was originally defined by Certeau and Debord is some distance from the term as it may usefully be applied in literary analysis, and particularly in the analysis of the western. The original situationist principle begins from the assertion that places have no one inherent identity, but are defined by their use, and their significance to the individual. To apply this social theory to literary studies it must be adapted to address not places themselves, but their representation in texts. The concern is not with how places themselves affect the "emotions and behavior of individuals," but rather with how they might be represented in order to evoke particular emotions and behavior. Texts with a focus on a particular territory, like *Gunslinger* or *All the Pretty Horses* (hearafter *ATPH*), provide maps to a particular understanding of that territory – in this case, the American Southwest.

The western is, as a genre, singularly well suited to psychogeographical analysis because it is a genre whose key signifiers are all anchored in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> See www.bopsecrets.org/SI/urbgeog.htm, accessed 1 July 2011.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *All The Pretty Horses*, in *idem, The Border Trilogy* (London: Picador, 1998), 1–306.

physical landscape of the south – plattes, buttes, canyons and cacti – or in our human relationship to it, our management and traversal of it, the means by which we practice the space: horses, spurs, ropes and guns. The ultimate signifier of the western is the figure which unites the land and its practice – the cowboy: Dorn's "Cautious Gunslinger" (hereafter "Slinger") and McCarthy's John Grady Cole.

The contemporary western is, as a genre, very much more self-aware than it was when it came to prominence in the 1950s, as the hyper-repetition of the same narratives and tropes in low-budget "spaghetti western" films reduced what were once connotative signs to simulacra interacting with one another, rather than any real attempt to represent or investigate place. Crucially, many of these films were shot overseas – in Spain or Italy – the divorce between signifier and sign so complete that it was possible to use signs that connote the final word in mainstream American identity without America itself being present in any way.

In order to reassert a sense of emplacedness in a genre that purports to take its entire form from its setting, writers of modern westerns play generic conventions against themselves, dramatizing the distance between the typical western and the locale they claim to represent. In Annie Proulx's writing, for example, the idea of the cowboy as an ultimate symbol of masculinity is queried, and indeed queered, by a pluralistic approach to gender and an *oeuvre* that focusses on women's voices, written out of the mainstream western.

In both McCarthy and Dorn, the way that the land itself is named and represented in the traditional western stands to be debunked. Both texts locate themselves on the American–Mexican border, and both use maps, foregrounding their focus on how place is represented. The introduction of maps into the narratives declares the map as a metaphor for the text: the area, and how it is named and portrayed, is crucial, and the texts themselves are literary maps of their setting. Fundamental to the act of mapping is the act of naming, creating connotative signifiers by which to identify parts of the landscape. Both McCarthy and Dorn use their western narratives to dramatize the ideological nature of those names, and above all to explicate the gulf between the ideas that have been pinned to the land in the common understanding, and the meaning or value of the land itself.

Discourse around naming and the divorce between sign and signified is postmodern; it has its origins in Roland Barthes's S/Z, one of the keystones of post-structuralist theory. Edward Dorn's position as a postmodern and left-wing poet has long been established, and the levels of representation in *Gunslinger* were crucial to the development of this status. His

southwestern landscape is dramatized as the simulacra of modern interactions, and his characters stand in for theoretical positions and schools of thought (most notably in the figure of Claude Levi Strauss, the gunslinger's talking horse). Cormac McCarthy is a groundbreaking contemporary western author. Reading these writers together through the critical articulation of Marcus A. Doel (author of *Poststructuralist Geographies: The Diabolical Art of Spatial Science*, a crucial new text on post-structural theory in the study of geography), provides a theoretical framework outlining the emergence of a tradition in the new western. The way that these writers use maps and articulate space is consistent with postmodern attitudes to mapping outside the literary sphere; it indicates a political and theoretical alignment to postmodern anti- or post-state political thought.

When Dorn's Slinger questions the poem's protagonist, I, for wanting to know what a place "means," he is criticizing the conception of place as a narrative with a single, absolute identity. The geography of *Gunslinger* does not adhere to I's concretized conception of place, but rather falls in with a postmodern definition of place identity, usefully articulated by Doel in the idea of "the infinitely hollowed ground." Any attempt to imbue particular stretches of land with peculiar values, be they moral or economic, comes after the event, in the machinations of capitalist myth-making. Doel explains this theory of "hollowed ground," or "signsponge":

In due course, the fractal articulation of difference will be seen to compose a signsponge: the infinitely hollowed ground through which all geography must be articulated. Or again: to produce geography is necessarily to write on hollowed ground. Geography *is* postmodern. End of story.<sup>7</sup>

What Doel means here is that the construction of place identity, which he calls geography, is postmodern in that it must necessarily come after the place itself, which he terms a "signsponge" because in its preexisting state it is uncodified, unsigned: it will accept, or soak up, whatever agreed system of codes is placed upon it, but they will not change the fact of its existence. Ultimately, the land will soak up assigned meanings, and cause them to disappear.

The problem of writing on "hollowed ground," of creating a text that is intended to be in some way representational, is contiguous with the idea of mapping: a map is not the reduction of a place to its basic physical components, but the reduction of a place to its constructed names, the signs that constitute what it "means" – so problematic in Gunslinger. Dorn explores

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Marcus A. Doel, "Proverbs for Paranoids: Writing Geography on Hollowed Ground," Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers (1993), 377–394.

the innate fallacy of the idea of mapping, and the relationship between a map and any other geographical text, his exposition:

He would show you his map. There is your domain. Is it the domicile it looks to be or simply a retinal block of seats in, he will flip the phrase the theater of impatience.<sup>8</sup>

The idea that a "domicile," or concrete home-place, can be contained within the constraints of a map is under criticism here. It is a "retinal block": a limitation in how "I," and the reader who identifies with this first person, understands geographical space. By constructing "the theater of impatience," Dorn is also practicing another part of Doel's geographical theory: he is cutting his narrative out of space entirely. As Doel has it, "There is nothing which cannot be cut; everything, from the landscape to a neutrino, feels the force of an interminable laceration. Even our words are cut asunder."9

"Even our words are cut asunder": there is an extent to which the cutting asunder of words is the main project of *Gunslinger*: Dorn enacts the supposedly paradigmatic cornerstones of the western genre to the point of pastiche, illustrating that their repeated subjugation to the dominant ideology of American capitalism has made them into signifiers not of the Southwest, but of capitalism itself. Those same generic signifiers, the horses, the buttes, the desert, now represent not New Mexico and Texas but Laramie and Marlboro cigarettes. In *Gunslinger* Dorn intentionally disconnects his language, his narrative, from any attempt really to represent the landscape, in order to illustrate how the words he uses have been "cut asunder" by their repeated (mis) use in the creation of the American commercial myth.

There are two elements in Edward Dorn's *Gunslinger* that provide a precedent for reading *ATPH* (and, it follows, the rest of the border trilogy) as a postmodern text that criticizes the American establishment for its imposition of an arbitrary and racist border between Texas and Mexico. The first, which poses the problem of the border outright, is the use of mapping. The second is the deployment of the generic conventions of the western, which both Dorn and McCarthy use with sufficient self-awareness that they must be read as arguing against the relationship between the literary and cinematic forms of the western and the physical territories in which they are set. This relationship is not intrinsic: the narrative of the traditional western epic does not contain

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Dorn, 3. <sup>9</sup> Doel, 378.

1002 "What the Hell Is a Flowery Boundary Tree?"

within it the essential nature of the southwestern landscape, because that essential nature does not exist.

Both *Gunslinger* and *ATPH* present maps early in the narrative and, in both cases, the map is a means of orienting the reader to the text. Dorn's map is in part an allegory for his text, and an explication of the intrinsic fallacy of mapping or of any other attempt at representing "reality" through text. The map in Cormac McCarthy's novel is no less concerned with problems of representation, and is in fact much more forthright in its political argument. He writes.

It was an oil company roadmap that Rawlins had picked up at the cafe and he looked at it and he looked south toward the gap in the low hills. There were roads and rivers and town on the American side of the map as far south as the Rio Grande and beyond that all was white.

It don't show nothin down there, does it? Said Rawlins.

No.

You reckon it ain't never been mapped?

There's maps. That just aint one of em. I got one in my saddle bag. 10

This exchange occurs shortly after protagonist John Grady Cole and his companion, Lacey Rawlins, set off for Mexico looking for work. Crucial in this quotation is the disjuncture between what Cole is able to see with his human eye, and what is represented on the American map. He "looked south toward the gap in the low hills," across a real, physical landscape that appears only white on Rawlins's road map. This is indicative of the construction of a total other, something not only unknown but in fact unknowable, by American map- and mythmakers. McCarthy also identifies who that mythmaker is here. Rawlins's is "an oil company roadmap": in Texas, oil is the ultimate symbol of wealth. We see here how the map is controlled by the oil company, who control the money, and the map controls how Rawlins conceives of land and space, what he thinks of as America and how he conceives of the non-American (or perhaps un-American) other that exists outside the border so obviously defined by a capitalist power. This quotation dramatizes the relationship between capitalism and the nation-state; the oil company cordons off oil-rich land, and protects it by giving it a national identity. This map, which defines the known home territory of the US against a Mexican "other," also enacts one of Doel's principles for any modern geographic text:

what mattered to modern human geography was the *principle* of separation, and not at all whether or not this gap in the order of things could be successfully crossed. As long as difference *is* separation, there is no problem in working out where things are: everything can be assigned to its proper place.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> McCarthy, 35.

<sup>11</sup> Doel, 378, original emphasis.

"Difference is separation": in this line, Doel neatly summarizes the principle of a capital-motivated map, and of a map that is complicit in the defense of a nation-state. It is the job of such a map to create and uphold distinctions between places which cannot in reality have any value difference. To begin with, the "difference" is created, as the agreed order elevates one locale above another, according to arbitrary criteria. Then, in mapping, in placing these locations on either side of a border, they are permanently separated and, in fact, the act of differentiation and separation is one and the same: it is the act of mapping itself.

In *ATPH*, we see Rawlins's complicity with the dominant ideology presented by the oil company road map. He believes that Mexico might genuinely be so wild and unknowable a territory as to have gone unmapped into the late 1940s, when the novel is set. John Grady Cole, who speaks Spanish, and who has been left entirely alone in his home, essentially orphaned, is less aware of the border than is Rawlins. After having a blood transfusion in a Mexican prison, Rawlins asks, "does it mean I'm part Mexican?" with some concern – something that Cole is able to joke about. Even Rawlins comments on the falsehoods of how the border is represented in popular culture: he cuts himself off in the middle of a song to ask, "What the hell is a flowery boundary tree?" He is aware of the construction of romantic falsehoods around the terrain that he inhabits, although he has internalized much of the xenophobia that is embedded in their construction.

The structure of the text itself mirrors Cole's psychological relationship with the landscape. To begin with, McCarthy uses little punctuation: conversation flows in and out of narrative prose unmarked. This submerges the reader in the experience of the text; the conversation is not flagged, so it is as much a part of the landscape of ATPH as is the description of character, setting and action. Furthermore, Dorn does not distinguish between standard English and the language of his characters: vernacular abbreviations, like "nothin" in the above quotation, do not have apostrophes as there is no suggestion of deviation from a correct form of the language - this is English as it is spoken here, the language of the place, and to alter it or to hold it in comparison to something else would be to belie the identity of the region in the same way that a map does when it shows nothing south of the Rio Grande. Equally, when characters either side of the border speak Spanish, no translation is given for the reader's benefit unless Cole is himself translating for Rawlins. There is, for him, no difference between Texan English and Mexican Spanish, and so none is presented within the book. The text is not a map that

represents places: instead, it is a map of John Grady Cole's own particular experiences in that landscape. Although the events that occur, and McCarthy's broad adherence to the exile-and-return structure of traditional epic, telegraph a conventional grand narrative, this psychologized aspect of Cole's *Bildungsroman* means that it adheres to Doel's principle of authenticity within a geographical text: McCarthy admits that "this is a story not the story" without giving an alternative perspective, <sup>14</sup> and so without suggesting that "the true story can be fashioned, nevertheless, from an accumulation of all the little stories sewn together." <sup>15</sup> McCarthy does not tell an authoritative story of the borderlands in his trilogy, unlike the oil company map that tells one concrete story of what constitutes "America"; instead, he makes it clear that he is telling the psychogeographical story of his landscape as it is practiced by John Grady Cole.

The terrain that is shown or effaced on Rawlins's map reminds us that, according to the codification of capitalist ideology, borders are particularly loaded areas. They are the arbitrary strips of land where the state dictates that the known ends and the unknown, the other, begins. They are essential to protecting the idea of the nation-state. For this reason, the border is an intrinsic part of the western genre. The Mexican border is typically the line beyond which there is no law and no extradition.

The no-man's-land identity of the border creates a crisis of representation; any attempt to map the terrain according to borders is an attempt to surmount the identity of the living place. Drawing a map line is an extension of the ideology that would see a wall built along the border – an external, artificial attempt to declare order and the dominance of state identity where it is threatened by the quotidian reality of a bilingual, commingling community. For McCarthy, anxiety over the nature of the border has a temporal as well as a spatial dimension; the crisis of identity and inadequacy of representation is not precipitated by the conditions of the novel's action or temporal setting. Rather, McCarthy argues, the nature of the place was compromised from the first moment that it was conceived of in terms of national boundaries. He writes of John Grady Cole's last ride out on the land where he grew up before he sets out into Mexico:

the shadows were long and the ancient road was shaped before him in the rose and canted light like a dream of the past where the painted ponies and the riders of that lost nation came down out of the north with their faces chalked and their long hair plaited and each armed for war which was their life and the women and children and women with children at their breast all of them pledged in blood and redeemable in blood only.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Doel, 381. <sup>15</sup> Ibid., 381. <sup>16</sup> McCarthy, 5.

John Grady Cole is haunted by the ghosts of the land. It is the human story, the "blood only," that characterizes this terrain. McCarthy situates the land very specifically, and gives a precise description of the intersections of roads, rivers and county lines that John Grady is riding out among, but the enduring image of the passage is not of the landscape that the rider sees but rather of the rider's own knowledge of the embattled history of the place.

When the original Comanche inhabitants of this part of Texas are mentioned again, by John Grady's father, it is again a means of discussing the inherent nature of the place, or rather that, post-settlement, post-colonization, there is no longer any such concept. He says, "We're like the Comanches was two hundred years ago. We dont know what's goin to show up here come daylight. We dont even know what color they'll be." Like the Comanches, the white settlers are seeing their control over the territory slipping, and the racial composition of the local community changing. John Grady Cole's blood-driven, warlike vision of the past becomes a comment on the future: the nature of this place is conflict, the "war which was their life" has never ended and underpins the changing border territories of the present.

The vision is not purely Texan; in fact, as the historical haunting deepens, the question of nationhood is opened up and presented from an indigenous, non-white perspective, even as it is filtered for the reader through both Cormac McCarthy and John Grady Cole. He writes, "nation and ghost of nation passing in a soft chorale across that mineral waste to darkness bearing lost to all history and remembrance like a grail the sum of their secular and transitory and violent lives." National identity is an entirely different concept to tribal people like the Comanche; another tribe is another race, their territory another nation. The "ghost of nation" that passes the "nation" here is twofold: it is both the ghost of a conception of nation that has been stamped out by colonial settlement, and the idea of nation itself, which is simply a ghost of an idea superimposed over the "mineral waste" that is the physical reality of the land. As in Dorn's poem, the discussion here is about what it is to be American, and the arbitrary and intrusive nature of the codes that are used to define national identity.

Dorn's poem uses archetypal images of a particular construction of America in order to comment on the construction of simulacra and, subsequently, the substitution of these simulacra for authentic places in the lived experience of contemporary America. The archetypal images of the western that give Book I of *Gunslinger* its unassailable sense of cultural location are the gun, the horse, the whorehouse and the gunslinger himself.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Ibid., 26. <sup>18</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Because the poem is concerned in part with pushing western generic signs beyond their accustomed remit, this concrete basis in one genre is tested in the later books of the poem.

1006 "What the Hell Is a Flowery Boundary Tree?"

Each of these key signifiers begins in its paradigmatic form and becomes something else as the poem continues. Take the poem's opening as an example:

I met in Mesilla The Cautious Gunslinger Of impeccable personal smoothness<sup>20</sup>

The gunslinger here is a composed, inscrutable and impressive character who gives away nothing of his personal identity in his overall impression of "smoothness." There is no suggestion of intended realism, as the maverick gunslinger in a western is never intended as an authentic character, but rather as a representation of the law and spirit of the West, condensed into a human figure. The composure of these lines has disintegrated by the end of the book, however; not only has the gunslinger become something other than a phantom of the western landscape – he belies a knowledge of, and historical interaction with, eastern territories like Boston<sup>21</sup> – but even the first-person "I" of this opening line has been exposed as a false construct; this is in fact the name of a character.<sup>22</sup>

It is in the character of Claude Levi Strauss, the Tampico-smoking horse, that the departure from assumed significance is most clearly dramatized. The Gunslinger says to I,

... are these men men.
Yes I answered on the heated margin
Of that general battle
Is my horse a horse? He continued
I'm on that score not sure
I said.<sup>23</sup>

Dorn has established the conventional trend of a maverick gunslinger with an exceptional horse, and immediately upset the convention by bringing the horse alongside the gunslinger into the whorehouse – in becoming matter out of place, the horse is now a taboo: something that cannot be accurately defined. Having set up these conditions in order to undermine the connotations of the word "horse," particularly as it is associated with "gunslinger" (side by side in the bar, the relationship between the two signs is destroyed), Dorn then demands that the horse be defined. By taking one signifier out of context and asking not that it be accepted as part of an archetypal terrain, but rather that it

Although *Gunslinger* remains a western throughout, it is in the interest of this essay to discuss how generic conventions are established, and not their later permutations.

20 Dorn, 3.

21 Ibid., 7.

22 Ibid., 32.

23 Ibid., 17.

be accurately and immediately defined, Dorn is able to debunk the myth of essential meaning that underpins the history of the western genre.

McCarthy, too, engages with generic archetype, and, like Dorn, allows the accepted cultural significance of certain signs to carry his narrative forward until such a time as it is useful, or politically important, to call them into question. This tendency is particularly prominent at the beginning of *ATPH*, when he is introducing the reader to the terrain of the text, which is imbued with a symbolism that gains power as the narrative continues. Crucially, archetypal signifiers are used throughout the novel as compass points, quite literally providing the means by which all of the characters, and John Grady Cole in particular, navigate the borderlands throughout. Consider McCarthy's use of Eldorado, at the beginning of Cole and Rawlins's journey south:

What's them lights? Said Rawlins I'd make it Eldorado. How far is that do you reckon? Ten, fifteen miles.<sup>24</sup>

El Dorado means literally "the golden one," and there are few more loaded images in the western.

When Rawlins and Cole navigate by the lights of El Dorado from an impasse – they are unwilling to lead their horses along a highway at night – they are looking to a spectral promised land that is part of the ruling mythology of the fictional universe they inhabit. It is because of the weight of this historical tradition that we understand how to read this passage: Eldorado on the horizon is a promised land that is no more than mirage, a promised land that will remain always just out of reach, at a remove of some "Ten, fifteen miles."

There are times when McCarthy allows his characters to treat generic convention with more self-awareness, emphasizing the novel's postmodern nature. Shortly after crossing the Mexican border, Cole, Rawlins and their new companion Blevins ask advice on where they can find work in the northern part of the country. Cole reports to Rawlins what he has learned:

He says there's some big ranches yon side of the Sierra Del Carmen. About three hundred kilometers...He made that country sound like the Big Rock Candy Mountains. Said there was lakes and runnin water and grass to the stirrups. I can't picture country like that down here from what I've seen so far, can you?<sup>25</sup>

The "Big Rock Candy Mountains" are an important landmark of American counterculture; the legend of a land where "there's a lake of stew and one of whiskey too" dates back to a time when hobos travelled across the country on

railway boxcars. John Grady Cole is speaking here and he is aware that the Big Rock Candy Mountains are mythic and that he will not find them in Mexico. Once again the measured reality of the land, the "three hundred kilometers," is played off against the landscape in Cole's understanding; he "can't picture country like that down here" and so it does not materialize. The effect of this juxtaposition is to highlight the artificial nature of western generic signifiers. They are real only as long as they are real for Cole, through whose eyes we see the novel's events play out. Cole's journey is guided by Eldorado because Eldorado is a part of the myth in which he believes; the Big Rock Candy Mountains are not real to him and momentarily turn the text into a pastiche of the western form, illustrating the arbitrary nature of this generic coding.

Having thoroughly explicated his theory of the "hollowed ground" or "signsponge," Doel concludes the introduction to his essay with the words "one way or another, geography is story-telling." 26 This is not merely a nicety on which to forge the connection between geographical and literary theory; it is intrinsic to the connection between *Gunslinger* and *ATPH* as postmodern westerns. Both texts are genuinely postmodern in their conception of geography, both in terms of the divorce of sign, as in named places, from text, the physical reality of those places, and in their psychological attitudes to history and locale. They do not attempt to weave perspectives together and produce a megalithic "Frankenstein" of empirical truth, but rather let a single experience - for McCarthy, the life experience of John Grady Cole, and for Dorn the experience of the reader - stand as their own testament. It is precisely because of this postmodernism, which is radical, anticapitalist and, in McCarthy's case, opposed to white supremacy, that these two texts are able to reassert linear narrative, the mainstay of realism, into the western, without reasserting the attendant ideological constraints. Ultimately, it is the gunslinger and his horse who understand most fully the relationship between land-based space and its representation in text. Slinger asks,

> How far is it Claude? Across Two states Of mind, saith the Horse.<sup>28</sup>