

A Walk with Life and Death: Spatial Poetics in Viramontes's 'Neighbors,' McCarthy's *The Road*, and Alarcón's "The Visitor"

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Abstract

This article draws on M. de Certeau, J. Jacobs, and H. D. Thoreau, among others, to explore the cultural representation of walking as a revitalizing urban force, a daily practice that although seemingly ordinary and apolitical, may become potentially subversive of the deadening impulses of cartography and capitalism. The analysis focuses on the complex links between walking, creativity, and death. The article discusses three American stories that, in their heterogeneity and the diversity of their origins and proposals, provide for new approaches to either subversive or submissive practices of walking and performing space, from Chicana author Helena María Viramontes's "Neighbors" (1985), where characters appear increasingly paralyzed, entering a state of stasis, subjected to the obstacles of ordered, dominated spaces; to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), where a father and son struggle to remain alive by walking, paradoxically, on the road; to finally Daniel Alarcón's "The Visitor" (2005), where a father and his surviving children strive to come back from a post-apocalyptic space by walking over the ruins of their small village, by creating paths anew. Despite their differences, these stories share the image of literally or figuratively walking on a lifeless, threatening universe: from the deadening streets in Viramontes's "Neighbors," to the symbolical death-in-life of the characters in McCarthy's *The Road*, and to the resurgent life above the cemetery, in Alarcón's "The Visitor."

Keywords: urban poetics, space, cartography, fiction, *flâneur*

Un paseo con la vida y la muerte: poética especial en “Neighbors” de Viramontes, *The Road* de McCarthy y “The Visitor” de Alarcón

Resumen

Este artículo utiliza las teorías de M. de Certeau, J. Jacobs, and H. D. Thoreau, entre otros, para analizar la representación cultural del deambular urbano como fuerza revitalizadora. Se trata de una práctica urbana presuntamente común y apolítica, que sin embargo puede tornarse subversiva frente a los impulsos paralizantes de la cartografía y el capitalismo. El análisis se centra en los complejos vínculos entre el deambular urbano, la creatividad, y la muerte. El artículo analiza tres relatos norteamericanos que, a pesar de su heterogeneidad y la diversidad de sus orígenes y propuestas, ofrecen nuevos acercamientos a la visión del deambular urbano como práctica de sometimiento o de subversión. El artículo explora el relato “Neighbors” (1985), de la autora Chicana Helena María Viramontes, en el que los personajes aparecen paralizados en su entorno urbano opresivo, sometidos ante unos espacios externamente ordenados y dominados; analiza también la novela de Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (2006), donde un padre y su hijo luchan por sobrevivir mediante un constante caminar, paradójicamente, a lo largo de la carretera americana; y el artículo concluye con una revisión del minirelato de Daniel Alarcón, “The Visitor” (2005), en el que un padre y sus hijos sobreviven en un entorno postapocalíptico mediante el demambular continuo sobre las ruinas de su pequeño pueblo, y consiguen crear nuevos senderos sobre él. A pesar de su disparidad, estas historias comparten la imagen central del personaje deambulando, literal o metafóricamente, en un espacio inerte, carente de vida: desde las calles mortecinas de “Neighbors,” pasando por la muerte en vida de los personajes de *The Road*, para terminar con el resurgir de la vida sobre el cementerio en “The Visitor.”

Palabras clave: poética urbana, espacio, cartografía, ficción, *flâneur*

Looking down from one of the old towers upon the sea of houses, we perceive in this petrification of a historic being that exact epoch that marks the end of organic growth and the beginning of an inorganic and therefore unrestrained process of massing without limit... In all Civilizations, these cities aim at the chessboard form, which is the symbol of soullessness.

Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*

The panorama-city is a 'theoretical' (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices. The voyeur-god created by this fiction, who, like Schreber's God, knows only cadavers, must disentangle himself from the murky intertwining daily behaviors and make himself alien to them.
Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City"

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, French social geographer Michel de Certeau contends that the Western concept and definition of place originated from a kind of inertia best represented by inanimate things, or by death. The "law of the place," de Certeau argues, is grounded on immobility and lifelessness: "from the pebble to the cadaver, an inert body always seems, in the West, to found a place and give it the appearance of a tomb" (118). Similarly, in "Drifting in the Cemeteries," French philosopher Michel Serres identifies burial grounds as the original markers of space, categorically claiming that "we stem from the inert and tumularly stone" (31). This originary lifelessness seems to transfer to and permeate the ultimate spatial center in the West, the city. In de Certeau's translation of these general dynamics of place to urban life, the abstract, geometrical, rigidly designed city appears almost a necropolis: inert, cadaverous, a mere cartographic simulacrum. The "chessboard form" of the modern city, German philosopher Oswald Spengler contended in his *The*

Decline of the West, is the symbol of “soullessness,” and represents “a petrification” of life (248). In contrast to the deadening impulse of the “chessboard form,” the bustling, if chaotic, operations of urban dwellers—what American urbanist Jane Jacobs (1961) calls the improvisational “intricate ballet” of pedestrians—“spatialize” the city. De Certeau’s theory of spatial practices, as well as Jacobs’s and to a certain extent, Spengler’s, relishes in this discourse of life and death, vitality and dullness, trajectory and map, motion and paralysis, performance and representation. The disembodied, lifeless, panoptic ordering of space designed by urbanists, or the panorama-city, only visible from above, represents a potential deadening of the city; it makes the urban complexity transparent and readable, but only at the cost of losing sight of the particular stories articulated daily in the inner-city space by anonymous walkers.

This article draws on de Certeau, Jacobs, and Thoreau, among others, to explore the cultural representation of walking as a revitalizing urban force, a daily practice that although seemingly ordinary and apolitical, may become potentially subversive of the deadening impulses of cartography and capitalism. The analysis focuses on the complex links between walking, creativity, and death. The article discusses three American stories that, in their heterogeneity and the diversity of their origins and proposals, allow new approaches to either subversive or submissive practices of walking and performing space, from Chicana author Helena María Viramontes’s “Neighbors” (1985), where characters appear increasingly paralyzed, entering a state of stasis, subjected to the obstacles of ordered, dominated spaces; to Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), where a father and son struggle to remain alive by walking, paradoxically, on the road; to finally Daniel Alarcón’s “The Visitor” (2005), where a father and his surviving children strive to come back from a post-apocalyptic space by walking over the ruins of their small village, by creating paths anew. Despite their differences, these stories share the image of literally or figuratively walking on a lifeless, threatening universe: from the deadening streets in Viramontes’s “Neighbors,” to the symbolical death-in-life of the characters in McCarthy’s *The Road*, and to the resurgent life above the cemetery, in Alarcón’s “The Visitor.” While the abstract and dominated spaces of modernity, with their cadaverous artificiality,

constantly threaten the individual with forms of paralysis, oblivion and lifelessness, the corporeal activity of walking, these texts seem to illustrate, may emerge as a revitalizing critical practice, a spatial poetics crucial to the very survival of the memory and subjectivity of the characters.

1. A Walk with Life and Death

Most critical analyses of the spatial practices of pedestrians as potentially subversive, creative, or “poetic,” have had to confront Michel Foucault’s views on the panoptic nature of urban space. Foucault’s spatial theories sought to counteract what he termed the “devaluation of space,” which relied on a traditional view that took time as related to “life and progress” while situating space alongside “the dead, the fixed, the inert” (1980: 150). Against these views, Foucault sets space in motion, as a key agent in the exertion of power. His conception of space famously emphasizes the ineradicable heterogeneity of spaces, claiming the need to unveil the constant opposition between “the great strategies of geopolitics” and what he terms “the little tactics of the habitat” (149). However, his investigations of space centered mostly on the repressive apparatuses of state administration as effected in and through the restrictive use of space. His focus on coercive spaces such as asylums, prisons, even schools, generated an overarching view of the inexorable collusion between space, knowledge and power. Space, in Foucault’s view, is discursively constructed—regulated, rationalized, partitioned and categorized—and subject to be used as mechanism to control social relations. In his works, the “great strategies” gained prominence, to the detriment of “the little tactics.” Recent critical theory, however, has resented Foucault’s neglect of “space’s aliveness” (Thrift 55) and his disregard of the “lived textuality of social experience” (West-Pavlov 165), and has struggled to reveal the poetic or creative “little tactics” of everyday users of space.

A particular emphasis on “space’s aliveness” permeated Jane Jacobs’ *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), where the writer and activist responded to the excesses of modernist urban design and the ravages produced by the movement into suburbia in the 1950s. She

condemns the “great blight of dullness” imposed by bureaucratic urban planners. In contrast, vital cities and vital neighborhoods, based on diversity of population and multiplicity of uses emerge as the touchstone of a reinvigorated city life. Abundant and spontaneous street life becomes central to her urban vision. Jacobs reads the microcosmic public space of city sidewalks, with its “intricate vigor,” as providing the necessary life-blood to the macrocosmic urban totality. For Jacobs, the act of merely walking on the city sidewalks represents an “intricate ballet” by which pedestrians, as “individual dancers,” perform the city in their “daily rounds” (50). Rather than the abstract design of urban planners, it is the rich texture of the city sidewalk, with its multiple, disorganized individual dancers, that combines to “compose an orderly whole.” In Jacobs’s analysis, the city walker is engaged in critical practices that undo the deadening impulses of the rigidly structured urban map and metaphorically reinvigorate the city, keeping it alive.

Along the same lines, M. de Certeau’s celebrated *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980) seeks to restore agency and intentionality to the individual city user. In “Walking in the City,” de Certeau sets out “to locate the practices that are foreign to the ‘geometrical’ or ‘geographical’ space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions,” practices that happen beyond or beneath the powerful discourses of the urban, “below the thresholds at which visibility begins” (1984: 93).¹ De Certeau defines these practices tentatively as constituting “an ‘anthropological,’ poetic and mythic experience of space” (93). As opposed to the totalizing strategies of highly regulated spaces theorized by Foucault, de Certeau proposes his views of transversal or transgressive tactics represented by the simple act of city strolling.

Urban life increasingly permits the re-emergence of the element that the urbanistic project excluded. The language of power is in itself urbanizing, but the city is left prey to contradictory movements that counterbalance and combine themselves outside the reach of panoptic power. (de Certeau 95)

The “contradictory movements” that de Certeau theorizes are represented by the everyday practices of city users. The minute

movements of the everyday user comprise a set of “indirect or errant trajectories obeying their own logic;” they therefore remain elusive to the controlling, categorical and disciplinary logics of power/knowledge theorized by Foucault. They represent what Gardiner terms the “non-logical logics” of everyday practitioners of the city who transcend “the technocratic or productivist logic” of modernity (7).

In their daily performance of the city, de Certeau’s walkers follow “multi-form, resistant, tricky and stubborn procedures” (Fairbanks, n.p.) that escape the dictates of the geometrical map. In their walks, elements like street crossings with traffic lights, stairways and slopes become obstacles to the steady march of city walkers. They are mere interruptions in the rhythm and melody of walking. Obstacles, however, that do not impede the spontaneous subversive creativity of the city stroller. The pedestrian effects a constant “cutting across” of the panoptic arrangements of space, engaged in a form of illegal improvisation that sidesteps the rationalist logic of the city. As opposed to cartographic power, the daily practice of walking “induces people to transversally cut across the striated, organized space of subjectivity, of all subjective territory, and enter the disorganized yet smoothly infinite space of ‘transversality’” (Reynolds 150). The walker intervenes in the urban milieu by distorting perspective, skipping across boundaries and gaps, playing with relationships and juxtapositions, to finally create a renovated, individualized cartography.

No individual, everyday spatial practice better represents the agency of the individual beyond the hegemonic gaze of knowledge/power than the activity of city strolling. City strolling is the more or less adequate translation of the French term *flânerie*, an eminently urban phenomenon traditionally linked to nineteenth-century Paris and to the construction of the arcades, the glass-roofed passages through blocks of houses, accessible to pedestrians only. The *flâneur*, as initially filtered through the eyes of symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire and cultural critic Walter Benjamin, would become an icon of modernist architectural urbanism, as much as a central figure of the “architextual aesthetics” (Parsons 4) of the modern novel. Through his aimless drifting in the maze of the big city, the *flâneur* collects mental notes of the city and transcribes them. He transforms

the chaotic, labyrinthine, fragmented city into a readable text. As alter ego for the modernist artist, the urban *flâneur* would enter the modernist text to create his² own poetic geography.

In “Walking in the City,” de Certeau traces the creation of a peculiar pedestrian rhetoric as the *flâneur*, a sort of semantic wanderer, appropriates spatial organizations, manipulating them and creating shadows and ambiguities in his daily walks. The rhetoric of walking, de Certeau maintains, articulates on top of the officially sanctioned meaning of urban spaces a “second, poetic geography” (105), a geography made of turns and detours which can be equated to “turns of phrase” and “stylistic figures.” In the mere idle walk, the pedestrian makes a powerful political statement, a statement in the form of an elusive and mundane rhetoric that escapes the grand narratives of modern urbanism and capitalist spatialization. The pedestrian rhetoric inserts itself within “the geometrical space of urbanists and architects” (100) to work against its rationalist logic. A micro-political tactic of disobedience is harbored within the macro-political strategies of domination. As opposed to the grammatical regularity of the spatial practices planned by modern urbanists, the urban pedestrian can intervene through its illogical disruptions and associations represented by shortcuts, by linking together routes, memories and experiences, by engaging in illicit crossings, by spatially writing stories that deliberately elude legibility, producing “unforeseeable sentences, partly unreadable paths” (de Certeau xviii). After all, in the confrontation between the grammatical strategies of the urban order and the poetic tactics of the city stroller, subversion always wins.³ “The long poem of walking,” de Certeau optimistically argues, “manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be [...] It creates shadows and ambiguities within them” (101). In light of the pedestrian rhetoric that de Certeau theorizes, the city becomes a blank page, a “great empty space” waiting to be written or filled. And the city walkers become “poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality” (de Certeau xviii).

Whether seen through the lens of Spengler, Jacobs, Debord⁴, or de Certeau, and despite their theoretical distance and the diversity of their approaches, the streetwalker appears as a non-logical, chaotic,

spontaneous life force to the city, an anonymous activist in a fight to counteract the deadening drive of city structures. The “wandering” semantic of the walker reinstates the “space’s aliveness” back into city life. Its reinvigorating energy is represented as essentially creative, poetic. The lifelessness of the urban map, of the chessboard plan of the city, largely mimetic and representational, gives way to the dynamic creativity of the streetwalker, who writes an unreadable poem on the streets. And yet, the complexity and diversity of the connections between the powerful grammar of space and the poetic practices of the streetwalker refuse to be easily contained within one single spatial poetics. Despite de Certeau and others, the subversive spatial practices of the individual share the urban space, and the fictional text, with stories of shock-induced anaesthesia brought about by the lifeless artificiality that haunts modern spaces. Whether lost in a geometrically stifling landscape—the result of capitalist gentrification—or in a postapocalyptic environment—a sort of wasteland—the characters in the stories analyzed below try to revitalize the personal space, both physical and mental, by traversing urban barriers, by walking amongst receding memories and death.

2. “An Exploration of the Deserted Places of my Memory:” Viramontes’s “Neighbors”

Helena Viramontes’s “Neighbors” explores the displacement of community life in certain areas of Los Angeles under the alienating spatial interventions of urban planners. The building of freeways cutting through an unspecified Latino barrio in Los Angeles disrupts social life and condemns its inhabitants to immobility, fragmentation and isolation.⁵ In the 1950s and 1960s up to seven freeways were built in East Los Angeles to connect the white middle class suburban areas to the city center.⁶ These freeways ran through Chicano communities, displacing countless families and disrupting barrio lives (Acuña 295). “Neighbors” chronicles the painful process of gentrification of the Latino barrio, and the subsequent reduction of the physical and subjective territories of Aura and Fierro, the two elderly neighbors, as well as of the younger inhabitants. If the barrio traditionally brings to mind scenes of social life, intergenerational communication and spontaneous interaction, Viramontes’s story portrays a sort of dead

barrio insomuch as the physical, conceptual and emotional spaces of barrio dwellers become flat, vacant, receding into oblivion: “[Fierro] was suddenly amazed how things had changed and how easy it would be to forget that there were once quiet hills here, hills that he roamed until they were flattened into vacant lots where dirt paths became streets and houses became homes” (113). Viramontes provides a visual picture of the erasure produced by rampant gentrification, with the foreign physical intrusion overpowering the social and emotional life of the barrio. The narrator voices Fierro’s lament at the disruption of his memories and experiences caused by the plans for urban renewal: “The endless freeway paved over his sacred ruins, his secrets, his graves, his fertile soil in which all memories were seeded and waiting for the right time to flower, and he could do nothing” (113).

Sensing that “the neighborhood had slowly turned into a graveyard,” barrio dwellers respond in two different, even opposed, practices of space. On the one hand, Aura and the youngsters in her street, known as the Bixby Boys, elicit a sense of urban defeat as both fall prey to what Debord terms the “petrification of life” (17) effected by modern urban planning. Aura, the female protagonist, is a reclusive older woman who “always stayed within her perimeters [...] surrounded by a tall, wrought-iron fence.” In a reaction to the social destructuring of the barrio, she barricades herself against the outside, resigning herself “to live with the caution and silence of an apparition,” constrained in her home for the rest of her life. Along similar lines, the Bixby Boys perpetually hang out before Aura’s house, standing beside a “candied-apple red Impala with the tape deck on full blast” (115), drinking and listening to music. They have made the streets their only home, so when Aura asks these “tough minded young men” to go home, they naturally laugh and reply, “we *are* home” (114). In taking public space for their own particular use, the boys generate an “other space” in which their subcultural identities can be enacted and created. But if Jacobs saw street life as vibrant and creative, and de Certeau envisioned the street user as the agent who appropriates space by “cutting across” the externally imposed cartographic boundaries, the urban youngsters in Viramontes’s story are not just inert; they are also cut across by space.⁷ The story seems to illustrate that although the subcultural urban practices of everyday users may open up sites of dissent and

resistance, they remain in the end subject to the strategies of state and police in the ordering of urban space. As Aura tries to teach the youngsters a lesson and, “raged with fever and revenge” (115), calls the police to the scene, the improvised home in the streets of the barrio is disarticulated, and the imposition of a new order ensues. The police act as enforcers of spatial politics, ensuring the adequate use of space. A street is by definition not a home, and may not be used as such, the police seem to say. The Bixby Boys fail to flesh out de Certeau’s invisible rewriting of space inasmuch as they hardly adapt to the image of the semantic wanderer; quite in contrast, they are practically immobile. The economic stagnation brought about by mass youth unemployment in Latino barrios in the 70s and 80s is replicated in the significantly immobile red Impala, the totemic car which used to represent a sort of *flâneur* on wheels, and now symbolizes youth inactivity and emasculation. In sharp contrast to the disembodied presence of the highway, parting the neighborhood into separate compartments, the red Impala represents the dark side of mobility, and the differential use of space that D. Massey has so compellingly theorized.⁸ In their social entrapment and intracommunity aggression, both Aura and the Bixby Boys reveal how the alienating spatial intervention can determine “the conceptual and emotional aspects of subjectivity” (Reynolds and Fitzpatrick 72). The communal ties are shaken from underneath, leaving the community fragmented, inert, whether in the home or the street.

In contrast to the spatial paralysis of Aura and the Bixby Boys, Fierro, Aura’s solitary male neighbor, keeps his daily routine of walking across the barrio on his way to and from the Senior Citizen Center. Despite his aching body, he continues to walk the spaces of his past, in a desperate attempt to keep his memories alive. In their daily walks, de Certeau argues, individuals can not only subvert the dehumanizing cartographic impositions but also keep the memory of place alive. In a particularly poetic reading, walking and travelling becomes, in de Certeau’s unattributed quote, “an exploration of the deserted places of my memory” (133). The attempt to keep memory alive seems to fit Fierro’s walks in the story. Despite the spatial violence symbolized by the disruptive freeways, Fierro continues to walk the neighborhood, remembering the places where his son died, where the theater used to be, where he used to buy snow cones for the

kids. However, as with the other characters in the community, Fierro's itineraries of memory yield to the gaps opened by modern urban planning, with the freeway that traverses the neighborhood becoming an insurmountable disruption in the "spatial phrasing" of the barrio. In order to escape the sound of traffic, Fierro is compelled to turn off his hearing aid. As a result, he also hinders his communication with others and remains trapped within his own psychological geography. Fierro's ability to "enunciate" the inner spaces of his memory within the constructed order of the city is significantly limited; his "indeterminate trajectories" reduced to the minimum. Rather than the speech acts theorized by de Certeau, or the "intricate ballet" proposed by Jacobs, Fierro's daily walks—confronting the freeway, the heavy traffic and other obstacles—result in the silencing and closing off of the character to all possible communication. Fierro is certainly no *flâneur*, out to probe the shifting textures of urban experience. His walks do not open up space to tactical appropriation and neither do they generate an alternative urban semantics.

In her novel *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007), Viramontes relates how the predominantly Mexican American barrio has lost its vitality as "the freeways amputated the streets into stumped dead ends" (33). In "Neighbors," all characters are confined to their death in life, unable to escape the feeling of defeat. It is only the interpersonal communication, again represented by Fierro and the opening up of his home to the visit of an unknown woman, that offers a moment of relief. The hospitality of space represented by Fierro's open-doors policy comes as a breath of fresh air into the otherwise stale atmosphere of the barrio. The heavy footsteps of all the characters on Bixby Street significantly contrast with the "barefoot freedom" of the visiting woman, a character who transgresses the borders and perimeters of the street "unmoved by the taunts and stares" of the neighbors. Her socially transgressive body (which casts a scent that penetrates across windows) is replicated in her spatially mobile and transversal behavior. However, Fierro's visiting woman cannot fend off the presence of impending death, which finally overtakes Fierro himself. Fierro's death leaves the street prey to its own death in life, with Aura trapped in her home, her communication with the younger generation blocked off by previous experiences, and her garden uprooted by the Bixby Boys; and with the Bixby Boys partially

dearticulated and corralled by the police. Police violence becomes a representation of the spatial violence that has fragmented the social life of the barrio. Rather than eradicating violence and difference from the life of the barrio, the police become the agents that bring violence, difference and exclusion into it.

The politics of space finally shows its dominant, restrictive nature as it traps characters within heavily regulated niches which constrain their subjectivity. What de Certeau termed “the murky intertwining daily behaviors” (93) of city strollers loses its liberatory and subversive potential as the urban space in the story becomes the context that severely determines and delimits the experiences of its characters. Viramontes’s story refracts and offers a critique of what Jameson terms the “our spatial as well as our social confusion” (54) produced by the modern city. For her, rather than facilitating a pleasurable spatial disorientation, the capitalist reconfiguration of the barrio, with the disruption of its social spaces, and the production and reproduction of social relations within those redesigned spaces, tragically fragments and disrupts both the individual and the community. There is hardly any intimation of an alternative pedestrian rhetoric here. The story’s presentation of the radical discontinuities and divisions in the social space of the barrio, and of the gaps and fragmentations of the urban texture, become symptomatic of the differential access to space, and of the enduring distance between everyday practices and the structural conditions that created them in the first place.

3. Extinct Lands in McCarthy’s *The Road*

If you are ready to leave father and mother, and
brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and
never see them again; if you have paid your debts, and
made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a
free man; then you are ready for a walk.
H. D. Thoreau, “Walking”

Land, like the social and cultural, can disappear, go
extinct, become only a memory.
Mary P. Brady, *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies*

In contrast to Viramontes's "Neighbors," where Fierro's walks take place within a stifling urban landscape, Cormac McCarthy's 2006 postapocalyptic novel *The Road* portrays a father and son walking vast expanses of the American landscape, connecting with the country's traditional archetypes. The act of walking in the American scene is closely associated with the freedom provided by the natural environment, away from the constraints and limitations of the city. In his celebrated essay on "Walking," Thoreau defines the walkers as those who are "so blessed as to lose themselves for half an hour in the Woods" (n.p.). Rather than inserting itself deeper within the rhythms of the city and the social, Thoreau's walker escapes from it all. The walk is a willful evasion from the shackles of society and conformity into the land of absolute freedom. Only this radical liberation, Thoreau contends, will provide the light-heart of the walker. And yet, the land outside the urban environment, the land that escapes the constraints of the social and the normative, inevitably has different undertones over a century and a half after Thoreau's meditations, in the era of late capitalism. Thoreau's paradisiacal land of freedom and walks appears as barren in McCarthy's *The Road*. Rather than the hospitable natural environment of Thoreau's musings, *The Road* represents the ultimate stage of the "uncomforted and comfortless" American landscape pictured by Adorno after his eight-year American stay (48). It is not the land eternally in process, optimistically moving forward that permeates so many American myths, as much as the land "becoming extinct" theorized by Mary Pat Brady, the dead land representing the ultimate stage of the gradual turn "from lived, embodied space to the abstract space of capitalism" (Brady 5). It is the abyss of spatial extinction that sends father and son out on a mission to produce a new space, to revitalize the land.

In keeping with the postapocalyptic nature of the narrative, the father and son's meanderings in the desolate American landscape unveil a desperate attempt to survive among the residues and detritus of the past, to stick to what was, and to escape what will inevitably be. Even if set in a Southern context, in lieu of the traditional sense of place generally associated with Southern society and culture, *The Road* gives us the "ubiquitous non-places of post-industrial America, where all organic connections to place have been ruptured and entirely commodified" (Walsh 50). As a result, characters float through a

barren landscape in a nomadic and placeless existence. They are en route to a dimly felt refuge, till it dawns on them that the only refuge is perpetual travelling, being continuously on the move.

And yet, although acting as scavengers among the detritus of a lost civilization, their wanderings are ironically represented in the form of a mystical quest, even hinting at the utopian creation of a new world. Father and son walk the “barren, silent, godless” earth collecting scraps of a lost civilization, as illustrated in the recurrent scene of the two homeless characters navigating the desolate south with the sole aid of a tattered shopping cart, containing their meager provisions. This image reads as a fictional, postapocalyptic revision of Baudelaire’s figure of the ragpicker, the marginal counterpart to the elitist *flâneur*. Next to the celebrated figure of the bourgeois *flâneur* walking the Parisian arcades, Baudelaire unveiled the presence of an alternative, less bohemian, though equally wandering figure, that of the vagrant, marginal ragpicker, “the man whose job it is to gather the day’s refuse in the capital” (Benjamin 48). In his reevaluation of Baudelaire, Benjamin’s ragpicker becomes the allegorical vagrant which embodies the ruins of consumer capitalism. And yet, Benjamin continues to claim, as the ragpicker walks the hidden corners of the city, he struggles to translate the chaotic and fragmentary environment into an understandable and familiar space. Rather than losing himself in capitalist debris, the ragpicker emerges as a creative figure, one who composes an alternative cartography based on the ephemeral, on the residual, on leftover and fragments, on processes of construction and destruction. As in de Certeau’s reappropriation of the *flâneur* as writer of modernity, Benjamin sees the ragpicker as an “extended metaphor for the poetic method” inasmuch as both the poet and the ragpicker work with the neglected and the discarded. “Ragpicker and poet: both are concerned with refuse,” claims Benjamin (48). In this sense, he is ultimately a Messianic figure, a character that collects the debris and refuse only to rewrite the history of the city and to restore modern consciousness. A similar Messianic thread permeates McCarthy’s novel. Father and son struggle to recover and recycle the refuse of a lost culture not only to save their own lives, but also to provide the possibility of a new beginning for a dying civilization. Acting as doomed poets, father and son traverse a world in decay, on the brink of disappearing. As old concepts have become meaningless, new ones are yet to be created.

The threat of meaninglessness sends father and son out in an adventure into the nature of meaning, narrating their daily lives, transforming their experiences into a meaningful story that they can then read to themselves, even locating themselves as the heroes “carrying the fire.”

However, father and son’s quixotesque roaming of the American countryside fails to register and transcribe the decaying world. The poem of their walks refuses to be written, as they both watch, inevitably, “The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion” (88). McCarthy’s text presents world and poem veering in different directions. Language is estranged from reality, and the characters are fully unable to either read the text they themselves are writing, or to interpret reality according to the word. If in the beginning it was the word, and the word became flesh, now we are in a reverse process, and the word is devoid of flesh. The novel echoes Paul Auster’s ruminations in *City of Glass*, where Peter Stillman, a ragpicker of sorts, tries to reconstruct the world by walking the city of New York and naming anew all the detritus of the city he encounters on the way. Walking there becomes the source of a renaming of the world, a tool to rediscover the equivalence between world and word. Instead, in *The Road* we witness the dissolution of such connective tissue. The text that father and son compose as they walk the desolate ruins of America is an intransitive construct. A construct that rather than allowing a new access to and involvement into the real, represents the inexorable deviation from such involvement.

The Road seems to point out that while, following Thoreau, walking may be a poetic act, a leap into the unknown, into the realm of a more profound or mystical experience, it may no longer suffice in a late capitalist world. The enduring distance between the everyday experience and the abstract system within which those experiences are situated results in alienation for the individual and the community. This situation identifies, if we follow Jameson’s conception (51), the postmodern moment. The late capitalist fragmentation of space has left the subject lacking a clear view of their position within the social and spatial reality. In turn, it gives way to a certain cartographic anxiety, a direct result of the alienating spatial anxiety characteristic of the postmodern condition.

Coda: Daniel Alarcón's "The Visitor"

If Viramontes's "Neighbors" portrayed displaced individuals as a result of the ground shifting underneath the neighborhood, and McCarthy's *The Road* dwelled on a land depleted of resources, both material and poetic, in "The Visitor" Daniel Alarcón allows the improvised community emerging after a devastating landslide to succeed in the recreation of the lost space by walking among the ruins. The story recounts how a landslide in the mountains engulfs an entire town except for the cemetery where the narrator and his children had gone to bury a dead baby. The father is one of the few survivors, together with his three children and a visitor from the nearby city who shows up at the scene. In contrast to the veiled presence of earthmovers destroying the land and making way for the freeway in Viramontes's story, or the ecological, presumably man-made, disaster in McCarthy's *The Road*, Alarcón's text portrays humans facing a natural disaster. The landslide has covered most signs of the old town and the valley, leaving only death and destruction. "On clear mornings," the father narrates, "I took [the children] to the cemetery, which was all that was left of the old town" (109). Just like the valley is turned into a tabula rasa, a blank space, the father focuses on the planes up in the sky, whose routes remain free and invisible. Then the visitor came, from the city. He brought news of the extensive devastation that had completely wiped out all cartographic points. As the visitor informs the narrator, death is widespread north and south, in the city and on the coast. The only cartographic markers are inefficient inasmuch as they are represented by the remote places where the relief aid is coming from: France, New York, Denmark, Holland. The reality of the cemetery, which seems to multiply in the form of death and destruction all around, immediately metamorphoses for the four survivors into a new community, with renewed cardinal points. The father uses the few signs that remain visible from the old town to make his way to where his house had been. Finally, the man reaches the exact site: "I made it, finally, to where my house had stood, to where my wife must have been buried. I'd taken a cross from the cemetery, scavenged from one of the wrecked graves. I planted it in the mud above my home" (110-111). Oddly enough, the regaining and rebuilding of a home comes through the planks of uncovered coffins, dug up by the flood. "With the

remains of the shattered coffins”, the narrator indicates, “we made a new home on the eastern slopes” (111). The community establishes a new home, with new routes above the mud that covers the old town, and new markers that give sense to their daily routines. In the desolate landscape, where only the hill of the cemetery remains above the mud, the narrator recovers a sense of space by simply walking over the waste land. As the narrator “stepped over the buried town,” he eventually made up a new landscape, with new routes and trails. It is a new urban geography made out of the fragments resulting from the landslide. Eventually, the new topography will be peopled by an emergent community, formed, if only, by the father, the three children, and the strange visitor.⁹

“The Visitor” portrays space as steeped in the world of social relations and social practice. Space is both constitutive of and constituted by the social relations that it harbors. Alarcón’s story disregards any anxiety over the cartographic representation of space, and opts instead for the production of a new space. The absence of ordained paths allows the characters to drift over, play upon and rework the few remnants of a previous cartography into their renewed imaginative space. “The Visitor” not only confirms de Certeau’s views on the creative potential of walking, of creating new trajectories adapted to the walkers’ needs, it also underlines Lefebvre’s “poetic” proposals for a re-appropriation of space. In his *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre articulates a “revolution of space” that would lay the emphasis on “inventiveness and creativity” (419). Lefebvre’s concept of poetry or *poiesis* is directly linked to its Greek meaning as creation or creative work, rather than to its later Latin reinterpretation as literary creativity. He assumes Hölderlin’s line, “Poetically man dwells” to reinterpret inhabiting as a creative act, a way to counteract the dominant “‘urbanistic’ rationality.”¹⁰ The act of inhabiting, rather than merely residing in a habitat, predesigned, finished, lacking in performative quality, comprises the idea of poetic dwelling: “The ‘human being’ [...] cannot do anything but inhabit as poet. If we do not provide him with (as an offering and a gift) the possibility of inhabiting poetically or even inventing a poetry, he will create it as best he can” (Lefebvre, *Urban Revolution* 82).¹¹ Inhabiting then comprises the temporal appropriation of space by the individual and the group, and its constant remaking.

And this attempt at remaking and refashioning the necropolitan environment has different outcomes for the characters in the stories analyzed, validating both Spengler's view of modern life as bound to become petrified, as well as de Certau and Serres's ideas about life stemming out of the immobility of the tumulary stone. If Viramontes gave us a story of spatial constraints hurrying the barrio characters into a sort of social cemetery, McCarthy portrayed the walking dead fighting their impending extinction as living and sentient humans; in contrast, Alarcón's story presents characters remaking and inhabiting space from and out of the necropolis. The three stories offer radically different perspectives on the possibility of a truly subversive and revolutionary poetics of walking, one that could undo the paralyzing impulses of metropolitan life. The rhetoric of walking emerges, in these texts, as a complex spatial dialogue loaded with both deadening and reinvigorating potential.

Notes

¹ Similarly, French philosopher Henri Lefebvre would propose that the *urban* (meaning the performative practice of space by the individual, as opposed to the subject's insertion within a space as container) "survives in the fissures of planned and programmed order" (*Writings in Cities* 129).

² In her *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, Parsons effects a gendered reading of the practice of the *flânerie*, starting from the claim that "the urban observer, as both a social phenomenon and a metaphor for the modernist artist, has been regarded as an exclusively male figure" (4).

³ In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre relocates the power relationships in terms of the opposition between the "dominations" of space and the users' "appropriation." However, in Lefebvre's understanding, as a major trait of neocapitalism, domination "wins a crushing victory" over appropriation, which is "utterly subjugated" (166).

⁴ Guy Debord's situationist notion of the "derive" fleshes out another version of the *flâneur*. By intuitively wandering in the city, the drifter seeks to create "a renovated cartography" that could replace the regularity of the typical map with the experiential, spontaneous appropriation of the city.

⁵ In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre notices the potentially destructive effect of highways: “A motorway brutalizes the countryside and the land, slicing through space like a great knife” (165).

⁶ In *Barrio-Logos*, Homero-Villa reads “Neighbors” not only against the historical fragmentation of Mexican, Asian and black neighborhoods in the 1950s and 1960s through the construction of the LA highway system, but also in reference to the historical memory of dispossession of the land from elite californios and *pobladores* right after the Mexican American war in mid-nineteenth century.

⁷ The police intervention against the Bixby Boys is a literal representation of the so-called “Broken Windows” policy, a criminological theory originated in the 1980, and very influential in the New York of the 1990s. While Jacobs (*Death and Life*) claimed that street life, with all its defects, was enriching, even if disordered, the Broken Windows policy promoted police intervention to sanitize and purge the city life of disorderly people: “Not violent people, nor, necessarily, criminals, but disreputable or obstreperous or unpredictable people” (Kelling and Wilson, n.p.)

⁸ In “A Global Sense of Place,” Massey discusses a certain *power geometry* of time-space compression: “For different social groups, and different individuals, are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections” (149). Similarly, Saskia Sassen has reminded us of the need to uncover the “interconnections between urban forms that present themselves as unconnected” (117).

⁹ “The Visitor” seems to validate Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas’s theory of performative voids. In “Imagining Nothingness,” a paper from 1985, Koolhaas argues that the void is not something to fill up with order and structure, but rather a “liberty zone” full of potential, a site for performance. Rather than representing emptiness, urban voids allow space for the appropriation and spontaneous improvisation of city practitioners.

¹⁰ Hölderlin’s line was also used in a brief essay by Heidegger, where the philosopher opposes the scientific to the poetic understanding of the idea of being in the world. Heidegger suggests that man’s relationship to the world is one that is constantly in flux, and that poetic creation and dwelling are necessarily linked.

¹¹ In “Walking, Writing,” Nathalie Cochoy identifies a peculiar rationale behind the representation of the idea of walking in American fiction: “the motif of walking initiates a transition from *mimesis* to *poiesis*, from an *imitating* to a *making* urban space” (45).

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