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Writing the Land:  
Horizontality, Verticality and Deep Travel  
in William Least Heat-Moon's *PrairieErth*

1. *Roaming in an Empty Backyard*

*Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it.*

N. Scott Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*

"I have traveled a good deal in Concord," wrote Henry David Thoreau in *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (4) to describe his half exploration, half sojourn in the rural setting near Boston around which his most famous work is centered. The interest in places is well grounded in the American soil: the fascination with geography and space has been one of the long-lasting cultural phenomena whose roots run deep in the American colonial history of exploration, and draw strength from the mythic value that place has embodied throughout all the history of the United States. As Myra Jehlen writes:

The Europeans who became Americans conquered and developed in their own image a territory of whose very existence their forebears had been ignorant. In that way they were quintessential aliens - yet they described their national origin and growth as an impulse of the land itself. And, as the land's basic dimension is not time but space, the United States were defined primarily as a place. (6)

Thoreau's remark (and, more generally, his attitude toward place) anticipates by more than a century a literary sub-genre that has become a key feature of American travel writing of the last three decades: journeys in hybrid landscapes, located in a semi-domesticated, home-country environment far from exoticism and adventure, which can nevertheless be still a discovery, especially in the case of a nation whose borders between "self" and "others" have always been very blurred. As Thoreau clearly understood, travel is not simply a question of distances; more important, it often becomes a matter of *density*: the main issue is not how far to go but how closely to look at a particular landscape. And even places apparently without history, or better, outside history, prove to contain a multitude of stories, relics, and traces hidden underneath the voids left by cartographic survey.

The literature of place, or "deep travel" (as it is sometimes called), is quite distant from classic travel literature. While the latter is generally centered on a horizontal movement in an open space, the former is a vertical movement in a closed environment, which starts from the surface of the land and goes backward in time, searching for the hidden social and cultural dynamics embedded in that geographical context. What shifts before the observer's view, like a camera, is not a series of different scenarios, but successive moments and elements (both from the natural and human environment) crossing on that single piece of land. This genre defies any definition or category: focusing upon one specific territory, these narratives take into account all *strata* that become constitutive elements of place: not only the self and nature, but also society, history, sometimes even geology, ecology, politics, economy. As Thoreau well knew, within these fields there is plenty of space to wander around, even in a little fragment of the home country.

Thoreau's lesson lies at the core of William Least Heat-Moon's second book, *PrairyEarth: a Deep Map* (1991), a detailed field study of an apparently void place, Chase County: 733 square miles and about 3,000 citizens in the southeastern part of Kansas. It is a space enclosed by pre-

cise political borders, which contrasts with the openness generally associated with American space, and with the Great Plains in particular. As Heat-Moon explained in an interview to *Artful Dodge*, "Travel is finding yourself in whatever spot you are and exploring that particular place. Once again, the notion that real travel is a vertical trip, not a horizontal one" (Bourne 107). Like James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) half a century before, or Jonathan Raban's *Bad Land* (1996) and Alex Shoumatoff's *Legends from the American Desert* (1997), Heat-Moon chooses to investigate a semi-deserted scenario whose relics testify the exploitation of a particular space by westward expansion, and whose appearance suggests stories often erased, rather than remembered, by official history.

What fascinated Heat-Moon about Chase County when he started thinking about the subject of the second book after the unexpected success of his first work, *Blue Highways. A Journey into America* (1983), was its representation as a void: a blank space on the map of the United States, right in the middle of the nation, where nothing seems to have ever happened. It took eight years' research and six years' travel within the county to unveil what lay beneath that emptiness, to disclose the geological, social and political dynamics that have shaped the land, even in a place on the margins as this fragment of Kansas.

The book's six hundred pages focus on the natural history of Chase County as well as its social history, past and present — from the descendants of the white settlers back to the Kaw Indians. Chase County is neither a rural, small-community environment, nor an empty, primeval landscape, but something in between: it is a border zone on the ridge of the West, cut off from the super-highways routes, where villages with often less than twenty inhabitants survive among barren hills, "in the only way the past does . . . by not dying" (*Blue Highways* 29). Far from the primeval world of nature, this land appears more as the remnant of the westward expansion, a space of transit briefly inhabited and quickly abandoned by explorers, settlers, immigrants, and most residents.

If in his first travelogue, *Blue Highways*, Heat-Moon's journey covered nearly all the perimeter of the United States, and his stopovers came to be only partial explorations of the many places he visited, in *PrairyErth* the horizontal dimension is reduced to a few square miles — a compression that allows Heat-Moon to test a "deep travel" along the diachronical, vertical dimension of space. As he explained in an interview: "Of my two books, *Blue Highways* is a horizontal journey. The goal was to keep moving — lots of places fairly quickly. That was the rootlessness aspect of travel. *PrairyErth* is a vertical journey. The idea is to take a limited place and travel extensively through time in that single place" (Bourne 95).

The contrast between the horizontality of *Blue Highways* and the verticality of *PrairyErth* is nevertheless an over-simplified dichotomy, since it encapsulates only the basic aspects of the two journeys. If *Blue Highways* recounts "a cross-country journey made up of lots of small verticalities" (Bourne 96) as Heat-Moon states, *PrairyErth* is a vertical journey made up of lots of small horizontalities. The dialectics between horizontality and verticality (and between horizontal and vertical maps) is one of the main issues explored in the text, which have to do with the many forces that interact and shape every place, and Chase County as well. The synchronic/diachronic reading of space and the horizontal/vertical axes around which the text is built are then the main paths this essay will follow, in an attempt to illustrate the ways in which Heat-Moon reads the land and turns it into a topographic map of words.

## 2. *Vertical and Horizontal Maps: Reading the Land*

Sundown: I am standing on Roniger Hill, and I am trying to see myself as if atop a giant map of the United States. If you draw two lines from the metropolitan corners of America, one from New York City southwest to San Diego and another from Miami northwest to Seattle, the intersection would fall a few miles from my position . . . For years, outsiders have considered this

prairie place barren, desolate, monotonous, a land of more nothing than almost any other place you might name, but I know I'm not here to explore vacuousness at the heart of America. I'm only in search of what is here, here in the middle of the Flint Hills of Kansas. I'm in quest of the land and what informs it, and I'm here because of shadows in me, loomings about threats to America that are alive here too, but things I hope will show more clearly in the sparseness of this county. (10-11)

In the preface to the text, "Crossings," Heat-Moon's gaze sweeps Chase County from the vantage point of Roniger Hill. The traveler's approach to the land starts as an authentic *in-field study*, as ethnographers would define it. From the very beginning, Chase County appears to be a complex social, cultural, ethnic landscape, where the signs of the past can either take the shape of Natives' arrowheads, abandoned barracks for Mexican workers on the railroad tracks, or diaries of nineteenth-century settlers just arrived in the prairie from the Eastern regions. "Items found, things dug up, oddments of the grasses like shards under a digger's grid" (194), as the author sub-titles one of the chapters, may be an apt definition of the whole text. In the magma of lives, voices, stories unveiled in his journey, Heat-Moon has to give shape to a subject that is extremely relative, apparently without borders.

*PrairyErth* is the story of a place, with neither "plot" nor main characters, as the author points out several times; to explore and recount it, Heat-Moon has to use instruments, forms and structures related directly to geography. "A deep map," the subtitle of *PrairyErth*, aptly epitomizes Heat-Moon's methodology by introducing the notion of "vertical trip" that the whole text embodies. Since he has to face an open space, difficult to grasp, at first Heat-Moon attempts to give Chase County a geographical frame, to define the coordinates and the boundaries of the land. The traveler dissects the place first by dividing it into the arbitrary fragments of the grid, as if it were an archaeological site: Chase County progressively turns out to be a jigsaw that the author has to reassemble, quad-

range by quadrangle. At the same time, Heat-Moon realizes that this map is made of geography as well as history, its "depth" being also the stratification of times and cultures. In *PrairyErth*, then, horizontality and verticality become more and more identifiable with space and time: a horizontal, synchronic reality of the present, narrated and mapped by the inhabitants in their encounters with the author; and a multi-layered, vertical geography of the past that the traveler has to unveil, recollecting stories of people and communities long dead and gone.

Heat-Moon's work starts ethnographically with first-hand experience, so the first geographies and paths the author reconstructs within Chase County are the lives of its inhabitants. The relation between Chase County and its people is explored by Heat-Moon in his interviews with the residents he encounters during his journey. Here, the construction of maps is often a central moment in the definition of the dialectics between the self and the environment. Many inhabitants represent their lives as places and routes, as *maps of lives*. This emerges clearly for example during Heat-Moon's encounter with Fidel Ybarra, a Mexican immigrant who lived in the barracks of Gladstone for thirty years, working as a trackman on the Santa Fe Railroad. To describe his life to Heat-Moon, Fidel draws a map of the places where he used to live and work:

I ask just where in Gladstone the houses where, and Fidel takes the back side of a ten-million-dollar sweepstakes entry blank and draws a map, but the page is too small, so he goes to the kitchen and returns with two sheets of typing paper precisely taped end to end like a scroll. He lays a yardstick on it and draws twin parallel lines across the top that are train tracks and then freehands in curving parallels that are the diverging routes, and he begins talking as he draws in sidings, bridges, the control tower once at Elinor junction, cattle pens, the Strong City hotels ... He draws and loses himself in the map, and he forgets to speak, sometimes only nodding an answer, sometimes writing it as part of the drawing. *I went to work for A. T.S.F. in 1944-1988. Section Hand — Tamp Track*. I watch his large hands, hands of a spike maul, labor their history onto the map, and I ask whether he has driven a spike in every mile of

track in the country, and he pauses and calculates . . . I watch his map fill in. Artless and accurate but for its scale, it is a portrait of sixty years spent along the skinny rail corridors of the county, but it is a trackman's picture: bridges without rivers, curves without trees, villages only sidings with labels like trackside signs, and Chase without hills, a level place of inclines you can't perceive. And he draws on and turns it into a picture, chart, chronicle, handbook. The clock has struck off the hour again, and he keeps drawing. Then he seems to begin to rise out of his cartograph slowly, and he speaks more and nods less, and something between us, a caution, has disappeared, the way it will between people who travel some distance together. (233-234)

Since the focus is on the self in place, Fidel's life takes the shape of a horizontal map, a two-dimensional entity in which past and present coexist. Often, in private lives, the depth of time is turned into a linear sequence, by juxtaposing moments and elements that recompose the mosaic of a whole existence. Fidel Ybarra's map underlines the close relationship between the place and its inhabitants, and shows how private maps are subjective but inescapable moments in the cultural reconstruction of Chase County's history.<sup>1</sup>

Lives turned into space: every event is tied to the place, as the frequent archeological metaphors in *PrairyErth* illustrate. Throughout his work, Heat-Moon tries to show how cultural recovery is an archaeological process, how individual stories and collective histories are all firmly grounded in the Chase County soil. Moreover, Heat-Moon equates the vertical journey and the reading of the land: he likens the geological accumulation that characterizes Chase County soil to a group of piled books, slender ones on the top and a huge volume beneath them (157). The land can be seen and read as if it were a book, an "earthen bottle of messages" (345) full of "cryptogrammic presence" (339) to be deciphered by the traveler.

The horizontal, synchronic representations of the land depicted by the inhabitants, then, are just one side of the cultural reconstruction Heat-Moon explores; the land is a four-dimensional entity, and its liter-

ary maps must also include the diachronical evolution of the place. Heat-Moon's journey into space turns inevitably into a journey in time, to recover fragments and traces of a past long dead and gone.

This vertical, archeological excavation in search of the past starts from the in-field practice and then proceeds, section after section, throughout all the quadrangles of the grid. The first fragments of his journey downward into the hidden *strata* of histories take the shape of old buildings destroyed by time and natural forces. When Heat-Moon ventures near the ruins of a house probably shattered by a tornado, "voices locked in silica" seem to be waiting for him:

There was the foundation, some broken boards, a few rusty things, and, thirty feet away, a storm cellar, its door torn off, and that was all except for a rock road of two ruts. The cave, as people here call tornado cellars, was of rough-cut native stone with an arched roof, wooden shelves, and a packed-earth floor with Mason jar fragments glinting blue in the sunlight; one had been so broken that twin pieces at my feet said:

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The shards seemed to be lost voices locked in silica and calling still. (42)

Geological layers covering, *stratum* after *stratum*, the spaces of previous times become the symbols of similar cultural and social processes of the past, now hidden under the apparent emptiness of the place. The strong relationship between the stories and the place is not only an author's assumption: the inhabitants themselves are well aware that, like the bluegrass roots, their lives also reach down deeply into that land. Some of them turned metaphor into reality by committing their stories to the ground: like Carrie Breese Chandler, the wife of the county treasurer, who slipped a one-page letter under the new floor of Cottonwood courthouse in 1873 (85-86), in which she described the life of the village interwoven with her own. The meaning of her act was clear to the people who found that letter: when the workmen who restored the building discovered it in 1950,



they did not remove it, but instead they added their testimony of their times to the previous one: literary *strata* piling up in the earth.

The stratification of times does not only concern private lives or events, but also different historical moments and cultures, different ways of conceiving space and our relation to it. For Heat-Moon, the recollection of private maps soon mingles with the discovery of wider cultural geographies that characterize all social systems and communities. The very fact that Chase County has been perceived through a multiplicity of cultural perspectives is evident in Heat-Moon's first attempts to describe the land:

Again: let the book page represent this country in east-central Kansas. Divide it horizontally into thirds and split those vertically into quarters so you see twelve sections of a grid that looks like a mounting-bar window of a dozen lights. These are their names north to south, east to west: Saffordville, Gladstone, Thrall-Northwest, Fox Creek, Bazaar, Matfield Green, Hymer, Elmdale, Homestead, Elk, Cedar Point, Wonsevu.

To them attach this old Indian story: The white man asked, *Where is your nation?* The red man said, *My nation is the grass and rocks and the four-leggeds and the six-leggeds and the belly wrigglers and swimmers and the winds and all things that grow and don't grow.* The white man asked, *How big is it?* The other said, *My nation is where I demand my people where they are and the grandfathers and their grandfathers and all the grandmothers and all the stories told, and it is all the songs, and it is our dancing.* The white man asked, *But how many people are there?* The red man said, *That I do not know.* (16)

Maps of the present and maps of the past, the European and the Native American (conflicting) visions of space constitute the two main cultural frames that the author explores in his text. The first horizontal system Heat-Moon has to cope with in his research is the white settlers' grid. As a result of the Westward expansion in the 19th century, the United States territory was shaped and divided not according to land contours, but

according to the geometric scheme of the grid, a horizontal mapping that covers nearly all the United States: straight lines running from north to south and from east to west, to limit counties and states. The grid was then the product of a precise political vision: it was the geographical instrument of the forthcoming economic exploitation of space, to be divided into lots and then sold to American farmers and new immigrants.<sup>2</sup> The cultural implications of this process are clear: space is seen as private estate — regulated first by immaterial lines on the map, and then by barbed wires on the ground that settlers started to use from the middle of the 19th century onward to enclose their properties. The grid is then a horizontal map, the product of historical, social and economical forces of the past that runs subterranean in the present as well.

Nevertheless, the grid is viewed by Heat-Moon only as an arbitrary system imposed on the landscape and often unable to define it. This becomes evident when the traveler explores the ninth quadrangle, Homestead: devoid of landmarks or a center, Homestead remains a blank spot in Heat-Moon's grid, the proof that this system is unable to penetrate the geographical and social context once it appears in full view in front of the observer.

I'm not going to hide this from you: I don't much like the Homestead quadrangle, lying as it does with all the mystery of a checked tablecloth, its section lines marked so clearly by square fields and roads cut into the high and flattish topography that they show up in satellite photographs. To drive the griddled acres here, except for a single mile in the most northeastern section of the quad, is always to be aligned perfectly with true north or precisely ninety degrees off it; that there are only four compass headings on the Homestead roads is an emblem of this area of wheat and milo and some overgrazed pastures, a forlorn place filled with the evidence of mankind bust mostly empty of men: a dried-up water hole on the veldt where you find only tracks of its inhabitants. In this place, I end up talking to myself to disrupt both its desolation and my sadness at seeing the grid so heavily laid onto the land. The

lines I look for are imagined ones linking seens with unseens, heres and theres, nows with thens. (363)

Homestead becomes the symbol of how the map and the land diverge, of how other, deeper cartographies must be found. The grid is the product of a recent history; it is just the first step in Heat-Moon's vertical/archeological search of the past of the land — a quest that becomes more and more difficult for the explorer, since new systems often erase old ones.

Heat-Moon's second step in this process of cultural recovery moves further back in time, reaching back to Native American cultures: a mosaic of tribes like Quivira, Osage, Shawnee and Arapaho or Cherokee that have lived on that piece of land for hundreds of years, and are now reduced to a handful of full-bloods and less than a hundred half-bloods (589). The author does not limit his investigation to the recovery of the tribes' cultures, but focuses in particular on how Native Americans conceived the land and on their relation to it.

In contrast with the visible presence of the grid, Native American paths cannot be reassembled in a precise, topographical frame: only few traces of the way Native tribes lived and experienced the land remain. Heat-Moon can often recover only their overall perspective on place: in contrast with the closed boundaries of the grid, Heat-Moon opposes the "open horizonality" of the Native American culture — that is, a space without borders, crossed only by traces that follow the geographical structure of the land. If the Native American view of space is illustrated many times in the text, it is only at the end of the book that Heat-Moon succeeds in locating a "Native map," opposed to the closed fragmentation of the grid. This Native map, reproduced at the end of the last quadrangle, is the Kaw trail — an open, evanescent geography that Heat-Moon tries to retrace on foot:

One thing remained to do, something I'd long intended: try to follow the southern Kaw Trail through Chase, the track once running from Neosho

agency down over the country line, just west of old 13, continuing on to cross the Cottonwood at the ancient ford near the mouth of Diamond Creek, then heading out slightly southwest toward the Arkansas River. Although other tribes probably used the route long before the Wind People, it's the path they followed into the Indian Territory exile. And so, one Tuesday in mid-October, I gathered my things up . . . (608)

The grid and the Kaw trail are in *PrairyErth* the main cultural systems related to geography; two systems that, together with individual stories and collective histories, concur to form the hidden, multi-layered geography of a space only apparently on the margins. The "depth" of the vertical journey turns out to be the sum of different horizontalities, different *strata* of stories and cultures that constantly overlap throughout the history of Chase County. The discovery of this vertical dimension of the land does not only concern the structure of Chase County; as we will see, this complex mosaic carefully recomposed by Heat-Moon represents a structural frame that connects both the land as object of analysis and the land as a literary subject that Heat-Moon has to mould and recompose in words. And since the traveler and the author follow two similar paths, the dialectics between horizontal and vertical maps shapes the structure of the text as well.

### 3. Crossings, Circlings, Black Holes

If we go back to Roniger Hill at the beginning of Heat-Moon's journey, we can observe how the reading of space mingles immediately with the problem of transposing it into written words. Since shaping the land and shaping the text are inseparable processes within *PrairyErth*, the author's quest for historical paths runs parallel to his quest for a structure in his narration.

Heat-Moon often compares the writing process to the excavation in the ground: both are ways to penetrate space rather than just move onto it. For him, the land is a palimpsest in which its own history is locked. This becomes clear to Heat-Moon when he thinks back to his grand-grand-

father, a carver who transposed the Old Testament into couplets, and whose eccentric aura has haunted Heat-Moon's imagination since he was a child:

Still, I like to think that in a cultural way ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, and I believe that I would never have written this book without a stonecutting, versifying great-great-grandfather. Perhaps I'd never have written at all, and surely I'd never have sought out this particular piece of prairie, because, after the thrall of the grassland itself, the thing that lured me here was stone architecture: the adroitly laid rocks of the courthouse, the Cedar Point mill, and the bridges, banks, homes, fences, cattle chutes. Once I came to understand that these things were only one expression of what undergirded the place — geologically, biologically, and historically — then my quest turned toward the bones of the land, toward the hard seed from which this prairie and its peoples grow. Whenever we enter the land, sooner or later we pick up the scent of our own histories, and when we begin to travel vertically, we end up following road maps in the marrow of our bones and in the thump of our blood. (273)

Excavating and writing; mapping the territory and reordering it on the written page go hand in hand throughout all Heat-Moon's journey. The author uses the geographical coordinates of Chase County as an internal frame for his narrative: horizontality and verticality are not only the two main paths of his ethnographical investigation, but they also become the two structural axes of the text.

As far as the horizontal frame is concerned, this is explicit from the very beginning: Heat-Moon decides to mould his text according to the geographical pattern that divides the county. The twelve sections of the book correspond to the twelve central sections of the detailed cartographic survey that encloses Chase County:

For thirty months, maybe more, I've come and gone here and have found stories to tell, but, until last week, I had not discovered the way to tell them. My searches and researches, like my days, grew more randomly than otherwise,

and every form I tried contorted them, and each time I began to press things into cohesion, I edged not so much toward fiction as toward distortion, when what I wanted was accuracy; even when I got a detail down accurately, I couldn't hook it to the next without concocting theories. It was connections that deviled me. I was hunting a fact or image and not a thesis to hold my details together, and so I arrived at this question: should I just gather up items like creek pebbles into a bag and then let them tumble into their own pattern? Did I really want the reality of randomness? ... Then, a week ago, at home in the second-story room where I write, I laid over the floor the twenty-five U.S. Geological Survey maps that cover Chase County to the measure of an inch and a half to the mile, maps so detailed that barns and houses and windmills appear. On the carpet, the county was about seven feet by six, and I had to walk from the north border to read the scale at the south end. As I traipsed around this paper land, a shape came to me: while thirteen of the maps contain only narrow strips of Chase, the central twelve hold almost all of it, and their outlines form a kind of grid such as an archaeologist lays over ground he will excavate. Wasn't I a kind of digger of shards? Maybe a grid was the answer: arbitrary quadrangles that have nothing inherently to do with the land, little to do with history, and not much to do with my details. After all, since the National Survey of 1785, seventy percent of America lies under such a grid, a system of coordinates that has allowed wilderness to be subdued. Would coordinates lead to connections? Where they themselves the only links we can truly understand? Could they lead to the dark loomings that draw me here? (14-15)

Since the land is a text for the traveler, then the text must find a way to become a cartographic survey of the place. The discovery of the complexity of the land and its reproduction in a written form are processes moulded according to the same pattern: an arbitrary fragmentation in closed structures and a geographical sequence that may lead to deeper, more significant connections. The horizontal division of the county into twelve sections linked in a precise, topographic order (up to down, right to left) turns out to be the structure of the book:

Now: I am standing on the Roniger Hill to test the grid. I'm not waiting for revelation, only watching to see whether my notions will crumble like these old, eroding slopes. Standing here, Thinking of grids and what's under them, their depths and their light and darkness, I'm watching, and in an hour or so I'll lie down and sleep on this hill and let it and its old shadows work on me, let the dark have at my own shadows and assail my sleep. If my configuration is still alive by morning, then I'll go down off this ridge, and, one more time, begin walking over Chase County, Kansas, grid by topographic grid, digging, sifting, sorting, assembling shards, and my arbitrary course will be that of a Japanese reading a book: up to down, right to left. (15-16)

Heat-Moon knows full well that every map is a cultural construction, and the grid is no exception. The grid is the white settlers' organization of space: Heat-Moon admits it is their way to exert control over the territory, similar to the control on the literary subject he mockingly tries to apply to his writing. It is not by chance that the author chooses to write the land "up to down, right to left": the sequence does not only remind us of the way a Japanese book is read, but also of how the white settlers conquered the American territory, from East to West. His construction of the text according not only to the map, but also to the "route" of the white settlers, is confirmed by the enclosure of the Native cultural spaces in the last (and westerner) section, "Wonsevu," and even further, outside the grid, in the appendix of the book.

The horizontal unfolding of the narrative (from East to West) and the spatial fragmentation operated by the grid become the means the author adopts apparently to control and divide the material gathered in his research. What Heat-Moon aims at is something subtler: his ultimate purpose is to show the inadequacy of these spatial structures, and the limits of his writing as well.

What remains outside the grid are, first of all, the Native American geographies. White grids cannot include Native trails, Heat-Moon implicitly states. If the horizontal white mapping of space embodied by the grid

becomes the structure of the text, then the text is necessarily incomplete. Native geographies defy the settlers' schemes, and they can take shape only outside the grid. Native maps reappear only in the appendix of the book, "Circlings," where the "approximate route of Kaw Trail" (602) is in the end reproduced as an alternative to the grid. In "Circling" Heat-Moon describes his attempt to retrace the Kaw trail on foot, with no precise map save a few inaccurate directions. Here his aim is not to divide the land into segments, but to connect them in a circular sequence, with no beginning and no end. Like the Kaw trail, "Circlings" does not have a point of arrival, but ends abruptly during the last night of the journey. While the preface "Crossings" presents Chase County as a fragment of the contemporary national mosaic, "Circlings" reconnects the county to another, more ancient cultural space which cannot be confined only to the past.

In contrast with the closed horizontality of the grid (and the closed frame of the previous chapters), "Crossings" and "Circlings" propose an open vision of the real and the textual space: borders, Heat-Moon seems to suggest, are there to be crossed; intersections, rather than divisions, give meaning and answers to his experience of place. "Crossings" and "Circlings" make the author's *manifesto* explicit: that is, open geographies leading to an open textual space. By framing the grid between "Crossings" and "Circlings," Heat-Moon demonstrates how, despite his deep ethnographic inquiry (and the book's six hundred pages), a great deal of material remains outside Chase County's grid... and outside the twelve chapters as well.

This "aesthetic of intersection" emerges not only as a theme, but also as a structural element within the whole text as well. Despite the apparent closure he operates with the grid-scheme, Heat-Moon starts disrupting the notion of a fixed geography from the very beginning: the more he seems to enclose space through the grid, the more he affirms its openness.<sup>3</sup> The grid is an archaeological field, and its arbitrary system allows Heat-Moon to construct a series of voids to fill, in which the plurality of voices, visions, and perspectives over the place can merge or



clash, confirm or contradict one another.

"Crossings" and "Circlings" are not opposed to the grid structure, but inevitably interact with it. Together with this "horizontal openness," that overcomes the limits of the grid, Heat-Moon also constructs a vertical openness of the text, related to the process of assembling the materials on the written page. In an interview, he confessed that in *PrairyErth* "I felt I had the problems of a poet: to compress and to evoke" (Bourne 103). As it has already been pointed out, despite *PrairyErth's* massive volume, the text remains an incomplete vision of Chase County. This "vertical" relativity is underlined in the last section of "Wonsevu," "Until Black Hole XTK Yelds Its Light": like the land, whose depths remain bottomless and invisible, the text turns into a black hole full of stories and events still to be discovered. Here the author can only hint at all that material that has remained under the surface; the black page that marks its end (an idea Heat-Moon borrows from Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*) embodies all the material that could not be included in the text:

So, this chapter doesn't exist: I've been thinking about doing what Laurence Sterne did in *Tristram Shandy* and printing an entirely black page. I like the idea because then the topic would be here, and all I— or you — would have to do sometime is remove the portion of ink that isn't the topic to let the chapter stand revealed, the way a stone sculptor chips away only what isn't his sculpture.

I keep having various ideas about what this black hole might mean: maybe it's an emblem of all the Chase material I haven't found or that hasn't found me. Or maybe it's a darkness waiting for a future light, material to come later ... On other days, I see it as nothing more than a small exit, a dark at the top — or bottom — of the stairs, or — perhaps, the kind of opening a Native American weaver leaves in a blanket for the spirit in the design to find release and travel on beyond. (599)

With *PrairyErth*, Heat-Moon subverts the cultural geography generally associated with the United States: in contrast with the open horizontal-

ty of the American space, Heat-Moon constructs a diachronic, open landscape that is the result of many different *strata* of times and cultures. The deep map is then a vertical open space that generates an open text.

The ways in which the land becomes a written text and the ways in which the text reproduces the land are not only structural issues, but they prove to be a central element on Heat-Moon's agenda, one that goes well beyond Chase County's borders. As Heat-Moon explained, "The topics are *of* Chase County, Kansas, but my goal wasn't to inform readers about Chase County. My goal was to show people a deep map, in the hope of encouraging them to penetrate their own terrain a little deeper" (Walker 295). In its sometimes playful, always self-conscious meditation on the relationship between space and words, *PrairyErth* provides not only answers about Chase County, but, more important, a set of questions about how much we know about places. Conceiving Chase County as a geography open both horizontally and vertically does not only mean recognizing that it is impossible to know and to tell everything about it. It also means remembering the links between that place and the vaster reality that surrounds it, and the necessity to shift the focus to what lies outside its narrow borders. Chase is a piece of a broader mosaic, a piece valuable not in itself but for the knots, the *depths*, it reveals:

My grid walking half complete, I understood this: I'd come into the prairie, this place of long and circling horizons, because of a vague and undefined sense that I lived in shortsightedness; I saw how the land, like a good library, lets a fellow extend himself, stretch time, rupture the constrictions of egocentrism, slip the animal bondage of the perpetual present to hear Lincoln's *mystic chords of memory*. If a traveler can get past the barriers of ignorance and forgetfulness, a journey into the land is a way into some things and a way out of others. (269)

Heat-Moon's vision of Chase County as part of a broader geographical context and his need for "deep maps" of places too quickly erased by his-

tory are *PrairyErth's* point of arrival. Heat-Moon looks at the nation *through* the lens of Chase County; what he sees is a place that, on the margins of geography, of myth, society and modernity, is at the crossroads of tensions and counter-tensions developing within the American body, and the symbol of how these forces are still largely unexplored, invisible and forgotten by official history.

The American disease — and I'm quoting someone I can't recall — is forgetfulness. A person or people who cannot recollect their past have little point beyond mere animal existence: it is memory that makes things matter. (266)

Heat-Moon explores and recreates an overwritten cultural and textual landscape, made of histories and paths buried beneath the apparent void of the Great Plains. His ethnographical excavation of this barren land is not only an act of cultural recovery, but it comes to be a re-appropriation of a social heritage that stands at the core of the county's (and the country's) present. Through *PrairyErth*, Heat-Moon then subverts the myth of a horizontal emptiness generally associated with American geography, and reveals the dense, often forgotten pattern of social and cultural processes that come from the past, work within the present, and write down the course of the country's future.

## NOTES

1. The relation between land and people is represented not only by two-dimensional maps: sometimes even natural objects can become a map, a message left by men who spent their life in the Plains: when the carver McClory Stilley dies, he leaves a squared block in the cave where he has worked all his life; it is his last work before death and an emblem of a new beginning: "A month later when

I passed the quarry again, I stopped and went back to the figure — . — and I thought of it as an epitaph, one scribed in the last block he shot, now cleaved and wonderfully squared, the ground beneath not yet having taken the first foot-fall of man" (278).

2. This commodification of space is testified by the "genealogy" of Chase County. As Heat-Moon reports: "Sam Wood helped to cut Chase out of Wise (later Morris) and Butler counties and, soon after, to enlarge it twice, once by taking a strip from Lyon County and another from Marion: the mile-long jog in the western side of Chase is Sam Wood's work. . . . Taking pieces from four of the five bordering counties, Sam assembled Chase like a Dagwood sandwich: a slice of this, a cut of that" (465-466).

3. The openness of the grid is underlined graphically by the icon reproduced at the beginning of each chapter. Used as a textual map to point out the position of the quadrangle described in the section, the icon actually represents an open space: three vertical lines and two horizontal ones mark the twelve sections, ten of which lack one segment.

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