

UNIVERSITEIT UTRECHT

The Landscapes of Frontiers

A comparison of the uses of landscape in the
works of J. M. Coetzee and Cormac McCarthy

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8/22/2013

MA-thesis for Master of Education and Communication

Centrum voor Onderwijs en Leren

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Introduction

Avid readers of the last few years will have had a hard time missing the names J.M. Coetzee and Cormac McCarthy. Both writers are highly acclaimed and very successful. Taking a closer look at these two writers reveals a great deal of similarities. One of the most striking similarities is the large part that the open landscapes play for both writers. In the case of Coetzee this aspect becomes especially apparent in novels *In the Heart of the Country* and *Life and Times of Michael K*, both of which are set for the most in the South African countryside. In this case of McCarthy one should look at his epic Border Trilogy, consisting of the novels *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*, which is set in the area surrounding the border between Mexico, Texas and New Mexico. Both writers are contemporary writers from a nation with a violent past. These pasts of both nations also shows a great deal of similarities concerning both people and landscape. Comparing two eminent writers from such backgrounds yields interesting similarities, which could then be seen as cultural similarities. Combined with a strong personal preference for both writers, the cultural implications of a comparison sparked this research.

This research is based strongly on the uses of the landscape by both writers. This motivates the choice for these particular novels by Coetzee, as they feature the landscape more prominently. The comparison will not be made per novel, but rather per theme. As such, there is of course the open landscape. Secondly, there is the notion of fences, a manmade intrusion on that open landscape. Thirdly, the history of the regions in which the novels are set, which is strongly tied to the landscape and the perceptions of that landscape. And fourth, the novels also have important connections with captivity, which is almost diametrically opposite to the perceived freedom of the open landscapes. Combining the comparisons of these aspects will show how the writers either differ or are similar in their use of landscape. The differences and similarities can then be related to the writers' different national

backgrounds.

Both writers use open landscapes and the countryside as a contrast to modernity in the cities. As this tension between countryside and city is an important part of cultural perception, Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City*, an extensive analysis of poetry concerning this tension, is the basis for establishing the characteristics of this tension. As Williams' work shows, the countryside is often seen as idyllic and relaxed compared to a rushed city life. Williams aptly places tales concerning this idealised perception of the countryside in the pastoral tradition. This pastoral tradition will be an important part of this comparative study as well.

It is interesting to note that a comparison between the two writers has not yet been made. The aforementioned themes, however, have been researched for both writers. Jeanne Colleran has researched Coetzee's own essays, as well as those about Coetzee written by Atwell, and finds a strong link between South Africa's white minority's love of the land and their inability to co-exist with the black population. Chiara Briganti has researched *In the Heart of the Country*, focussing on the protagonist's mental state and the spatial dimensions in the novel. Nadine Gordimer has written a review of *Life and Times of Michael K* in which she comments on the role of gardening in the novel and gives this political meaning. Paul Franssen has written an article about the intertextual link between *Life & Times of Michael K* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, dealing with vagrancy and history. Shadi Neimneh and Muhaidat Fatima have researched the ecological aspects of *Michael K* and linked these to politics. Anthony Vital proposes an ecology-based way of interpreting postcolonial literature and uses his research of *Michael K* as an example of this. Derek Wright has written about the feminine character of the earth and the role this plays in *Michael K*. And finally, J.M. Coetzee himself has written in the introduction to a collection of his essays about the tradition of the South African pastoral.

In researching McCarthy many researchers have looked at the role of the landscape as well. Susan Kollin argues that McCarthy has written an anti-western. Vince Brewton looks at the violence and the surroundings in the Border Trilogy, comparing it to McCarthy's earlier works. Walter Sullivan explores briefly some of the Border Trilogy's themes, especially the role of the landscape in the novels. John Blair has researched the romantic ideals present in *All the Pretty Horses*. Robert Sickels explores the role of the frontier and the pastoral aspects in the individual novels of the trilogy. Ashley Bourne has written about the characteristics and the role of the landscape in the Border Trilogy, linking the landscape to the characters' perceptions in the novels.

The usual idyllic view of the countryside is changed by both Coetzee and McCarthy. The role the actual landscape plays in this view, as well as some related themes, has been an important focal point for many researchers. However, a comparison has never been made. This comparison is based on the eminent status of both writers, as well as the strong claim either writer has to be an exemplary writer for their respective cultural backgrounds. The comparison will cast a light on cultural similarities and differences.

“Any landscape is a condition of the spirit.” – Henri Frederic Amiel

Landscape

The allure of the outstretched fields and fertile lands has inspired countless adventurers and pioneers, as well as conquerors, over the course of history. The grand vistas and large open spaces have inspired artists of all kinds, and writers are no exception to this. The same is the case in the novels by J.M. Coetzee and Cormac McCarthy that will be discussed here. The landscapes of both novelists are strikingly similar, as is the importance of the landscape in the work of both. In fact, the countryside and its specifics are crucial to Coetzee’s novels and in the case of McCarthy’s Border Trilogy one can say that “the western landscape is arguably the most striking character in the novels” (Bourne, 109). The question that remains once one acknowledges the importance of the landscapes is if the ways in which the writers use the countryside differs or if their uses are similar. I will argue that Coetzee’s view and descriptions of the countryside are strongly tied to fertility and gardening, while McCarthy’s descriptions of the majestic views are an extension of the protagonists’ mood or fortune.

Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* shows a keen interest in the countryside, starting with the title. The setting of the novel is a farm in the South African countryside, which the narrator, Magda, identifies as lying in the heart of nowhere (Coetzee *Country*, 4). However, as Magda later on in the novel contemplates the problems of her extensive monologues she also touches on the implication of the farm’s surroundings, asking herself “[i]s it possible that I am a prisoner not of the lonely farmhouse and the stone desert but of my stony monologue?” (*Country*, 13) This description of the farm’s surroundings as a stony desert returns many times, showing clearly that it was not the fertility of the land that beckoned Magda’s ancestors. The main goal of the farm is sheepherding, giving the farm a pastoral aspect. Magda, however, shows a keen interest in the life of the desert, specifically the insects. She identifies this interest in the following passage: “[a]nother aspect of myself, now that I am

talking about myself, is my love of nature, particularly of insect life, of the scurrying purposeful life that goes on around each ball of dung and under every stone.” (Country, 6)

This passage is contradictory, as all other mentions of the landscape depict it as clearly void of life and possibility. The main idea that Magda conveys is of her feeling trapped on the farm, as it is surrounded by an inhospitable desert. Magda mentions the feeling of this desert isolation, saying “we might as well be living on the moon” (45). This is one sense in which Coetzee’s writing refutes the pastoral ideal of freedom, actually depicting the open landscape as imprisoning.

Magda makes some mention of having travelled within South Africa in her youth, but during the events as related in the novel she remains on the farm, unable to leave. She is unfamiliar with other landscapes than the one she is in. She does dream about leaving the farm, but it is nothing more than imagining. Magda’s daydreams are the only descriptions of the world outside the farm. She also occasionally mentions places close to the farm, but these are never described more extensively. When something is needed from outside the farm, for instance the money needed to pay the servants, Magda will not go herself, but rather sends her servant (109). This seems to indicate that Magda perceives the farm as an actual prison, from which she cannot leave. It is unclear why she feels so severely trapped on the farm, especially after killing her father and taking his place as head of the farm. Perhaps, as a woman, she is limited in her freedom of movement. This limit would then be culturally imbedded in Magda, as she cannot shake the limitation even as she replaces her father as head of the farm.

In the Heart of the Country features aspects things that make it an anti-pastoral. The genre of the pastoral is devoted to the peace and calm that can be found in the countryside, or so the genre claims. The setting of the novel is clearly pastoral. However, aside from the setting, the pastoral elements are absent in the novel. The pastoral is strongly focused on a return to the tradition of labour in the countryside, a life away from books and study. Magda

is clearly not a part of this tradition, as she not only lives inside a narrative of her own creation, but also her migraines and gender prevent her from partaking in any labour. Also, as Coetzee himself argues, “[p]astoral in the West has always been under pressure to demonstrate that the retreat it advocates from the business of society is not a mere escape into sensual sloth” (*White Writing*, 4-5). As Magda is often tied to her bedroom due to migraine attacks and is unable to work in the field, she does live in a sort of sensual sloth, albeit a very painful sort. Magda’s active rejection of a pastoral ideal makes the novel an anti-pastoral. The genre and setting of the pastoral place limits on Magda, as Coetzee argues that “in the farm novel we find women, in effect, imprisoned in the farmhouse, confined to the breast-function of giving food to men, cut off from the outdoors” (9). Unable to shake the shackles of the traditions she has been raised in, Magda feels almost physically bound to the farm. It is only in the final passage of the novel that Magda finds herself thinking about and even longing for a more pastoral life, referencing to “poems [...] about the heart that aches for Verlore Vlakte” (150) and speaking of “the beauty of this forsaken world” (151). In the end she acknowledges the pastoral beauty of the countryside, but still places herself outside of the idyll.

The arid nature of Magda’s surroundings and her strong ties to it are also noted by Briganti, who discusses “The merging of Magda and country” and states that “[t]he country, too, like Magda, is a ‘jagged virgin’” (43). When Magda, towards the end of the novel, starts messaging airplanes that pass overhead by spelling out messages with coloured rocks, Briganti identifies this as “the narratorial merging of arid country, sterile spinster, and the language that flows through her” (42). This changes Magda’s own “stony monologue” into part of “the stone desert” (13). Magda accepts the arid nature of her surroundings, but she does state her desire for rain, when she gets a rifle from the “place where umbrellas would stand if we ever used umbrellas, if our response to rain here were not to lift our faces to it and catch the sultry drops in our mouths and rejoice” (63). Magda’s descriptions of the landscape

are always, in some way, linked to its fertility, or lack thereof, even when their focus is the physical limit formed by the desert.

Whereas Magda is a woman who suffers because of her surroundings, Michael K is a young man who attempts to live in the countryside by himself and escape a society at war, while others make this impossible for him. Traveling from the Cape Peninsula, Michael K tries to take his mother to the farm where she used to live and work in her youth. When along the way he manages to find food in the country, he reflects on this by thinking: “[a]t last I am living off the land” (46). This establishes the link of the land to nourishment, a tenuous link which is continued throughout the novel. Michael’s freedom of movement, however, may be *Life and Times of Michael K*’s most important contrast compared to *In the Heart of the Country*. Magda was confined within her farm, seemingly unable to leave. Michael, on the other hand, moves great distances, across roads, railroads and fences. The cause of this difference is most likely the difference in gender. Another difference between the two protagonists that could influence their freedom is race, but this does not seem to be the limiting factor. Magda, as a white farmer, has potentially all the freedom she could ever want. Whereas Michael, who is most likely coloured, is limited in what he is able to do or where he wants to go. It is Michael’s spirit that causes him to defy the travel restrictions placed on the Cape and the confinement in both internment camps. Magda fails in replacing her father in part due to her gender, but Michael’s gender allows him to mostly make his own choices regarding his future and desires. Also significant in this sense is the fact that Michael seeks out the nothingness of the countryside, whereas Magda dreams of the cities and the coast. This is mostly likely also due to the difference in gender, as Michael desires to toil in the countryside, to work as a gardener. As already has been explored, Magda is denied the possibility of performing the labour of the farm.

The ideas of nourishment and fertility present in the depictions of the landscape in

Michael K are also connected to female notions, and more specifically to Michael's mother. The place in the countryside where Michael makes a sort of home for himself is described in feminine terms; "[t]here hundred yards from the dam two low hills, like plump breasts, curved towards each other. Where they met, their sides formed a sloping crevice as deep as a man's waist. [...] [t]his was the site K settled on." (Michael, 100) This description of the land as female does contrast a historically more usual South African description as identified by Coetzee himself. Coetzee argues "if the pastoral writer mythologizes the earth as a mother, it is more often than not as a harsh, dry mother without curves or hollows, infertile, unwilling to welcome her children back even when they ask to be buried in her" (*White Writing*, 9) The ground and the country provide for Michael, much like his mother provided for him in the beginning of his life. However, like his mother, who struggled to properly feed Michael as a result of his harelip, "[the land of the Karoo] barely keeps him alive and seems rather to adumbrate his grave" (Wright, 439). Michael's view of the land is thus strongly connected to his view of his mother, as a provider of the barest of necessities.

Another link between Michael's mother and the earth is noted by Wright, who argues that "[Michael] transports his mother across the Cape in a converted wheelbarrow, used in his work as a gardener for the transportation of earth" (438) When Michael finds the Visagie farm where he tries to settle he abandons his mother's money and lives by the bounty of his new mother figure, the land. This is also shown in Michael's attitude regarding his mother's ashes, given as "[t]he time came to return his mother to the earth." (58) The use of the word return suggests that Michael views the ground as the provider for all life, including his mother's. According to Neimneh this passage also indicates that "[b]y spreading his mother's ashes over the land, K achieves a symbolic unity with the earth" (p.17) By creating a sort of mother from the earth, Michael turns away from conventional society. Or, as Neimneh argues: "While human attachments like fatherhood and motherhood are difficult to imagine in a world full of

violence and strife like K's, the novel posits an alternative in the abiding earth" (17). The choice of a mother rather than a father is explained by Franssen, who argues that "the book presents these issues, the drive for empire and dynasty, and the patriarchy, as a diagnosis of the ills of South African society" (455). Since Michael seeks to escape conflict, the choice for a mother seems logical.

However, Michael is not completely unaware of the harshness of the South African countryside, which is typically desert or savannah. For instance, when contemplating his views of social behavior, Michael thinks "[p]erhaps I am the stoney ground". (48) Also, when his health deteriorates, Michael describes the ground as hostile, stating "[h]e was trying to cross an arid landscape that tilted and threatened to tip him over its edge." (57) However, as Wright explains: "Coetzee's Cape gardener, faced with the harsh, inhospitable earthscapes of the Karoo, finds himself perfectly at home with their refusal of human meanings, their preverbal nothingness" (436). The stark contrast between the Cape and the Karoo is also noted by Neimneh, who states that "[t]he mapped parks of Cape Town contrast with the expansion of nature in the Karoo mountains [Michael] flees to" (14). Michael's desire to live in this harsh, arid country is motivated by his desire to flee from the conflict in the novel's South Africa. Nature as such is a means to escape. This notion is also argued by Neimneh, who states "Hence, nature, in this sense, is a redemptive landscape, a safe haven from bad politics" (14). Combining Michael's desire to live away from most people, and the harsh conditions of the Karoo leads Vital to state "[h]ow K's suffering follows as material consequence from his desires and choices when he attempts to 'live off the land'" (98).

It is Michael's education as a gardener that offers him an option for turning away from the political situation. Michael himself describes his station when he says that "the truth is that I have been a gardener, first for the Council, later for myself, and gardeners spend their time with their noses to the ground." (181) The idea of the gardener as apolitical was

criticized by Nadine Gordimer 1984 when she reviewed *Life and Times of Michael K*. She expresses this as “For is there an idea of survival that can be realized outside a political doctrine? Is there a space that lies between camps?” (Gordimer) Gordimer does argue that Michael’s gardening is aimed at keeping alive the earth; “[f]rom this perspective the long history of terrible wars whose reason has been advanced as ‘to augment human happiness’ could, I suppose, be turned away from; only the death of the soil is the end of life” (Gordimer). Michael’s mentality as a gardener strengthens the role of the landscape as fertile, or as showing a lack of fertility. It is the ground’s ability, even if limited, to give life that make it a viable destination for Michael in his escape from society.

Life and Times of Michael K is an anti-pastoral in many ways. The fact that Michael wants to leave the city to live off the land is strongly tied to the idea of the pastoral. In this case the desire to leave the city is fueled by the raging war, but the country does not provide Michael with peace. On the contrary, he actually encounters both soldiers and rebels in the countryside, he is captured and incarcerated and suffers from a lack of food. While the pastoral deals with defending against accusations of sensual sloth (Coetzee *White Writing*, 4-5), *Life & Times of Michael K* actually shows its protagonist not doing all that much. This inactivity is caused by a fear of being seen during the day, as well as a loss of strength due to severe malnourishment. Both of these factors clash heavily with the traditional pastoral. As the novel’s setting is pastoral, the narrative has an anti-pastoral character.

Cormac McCarthy’s use of the landscape in his Border Trilogy focuses strongly on the majestic vistas found in Texas, New Mexico, and just south of the Mexican border. This was a shift from the setting of his earlier novels, which were set in more swamp-like landscapes.. The switch towards the south-western desert is commented on by Brewton, who links the switch to a change in the cultural awareness in the USA:

The desert landscape had not been a prominent part of the American imagination since the Second World War, but the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the American military build-up in Saudi Arabia, and most importantly, the around-the-clock media coverage of events in the Gulf thrust the sensibility of the desert back into the American consciousness. (132)

The landscape is a very prominent part of all three novels of the trilogy. As Bourne states: “in Cormac McCarthy’s *Border Trilogy*, the western landscape is arguably the most striking character in the novels” (109). The trilogy’s descriptions of the landscape are influenced strongly by the protagonists’ personal experiences and fortunes. This is also argued by Bourne, who states that “the young men’s – and the reader’s – perceptions of place are shaped as much by ‘internal horizons’ of personal experience as by the ‘external horizons’ of location” (112). The trilogy deals with the increasing modernization of the Southern States Texas and New Mexico, and the desire of two boys to hold on to more old-fashioned ideals, which Bourne argues in saying “[i]t is the mythic lifestyle associated with the West that John Grady and Billy attempt to cling to in creating their identity” (120). This is repeated by Sickels, who argues that “Cole and Parham, feeling the encroachment of increasing urbanization, leave the American Southwest to seek a simpler, more pastoral existence in Mexico” (347). In order to find this Western lifestyle both boys travel south to Mexico. However, they do not encounter the freedom and possibilities of the cowboy life they seek. Instead, as Kollin argues: “[a]n inscrutable and bewildering topography in Anglo literature, Mexico becomes a place where merciful death awaits the foreign traveler” (p.581). The Mexico described in the *Border Trilogy* is coloured by a violent past. This is also identified by Bourne; “[i]n each book of the trilogy, John Grady and Billy ride through places that, though empty and peaceful at the moment, are haunted by the echoes of violence and primitive history” (118). This nature of Mexico keeps the protagonists from finding what they search

for across the border. As they also cannot find back what they desire in the United States, the novels can be categorized “into the subgenre of the ‘end of the West’ Western” (Kollin, 570).

The character of the Texan landscape in McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses* is changing. Even though it is sometimes made up of “hard flat plains” (15) it is for the most part divided over ranches, and described as “open pastureland” (31). However, these ranches are disappearing, as is the ranch where the novel’s protagonist, John Grady, grew up. This is also described by Kollin, who discusses the ranch as follows: “[f]ailing to cover expenses for the past twenty years, the ranch has not provided John Grady or his family any kind of dependable future” (571). Kollin also indicates that the landscape is changing, stating that “[t]he landscape John Grady has known all his life is rapidly becoming threatened by a cold-war military infrastructure and a burgeoning oil boom that promises to remap the Texas of his childhood” (570). This drives John Grady to look for his ideal life in Mexico with his buddy Lacey Rawlins. This journey is explained by Sullivan, who argues that “John Grady Cole, protagonist of *All the Pretty Horses*, and Billy Parham, hero of *The Crossing* [...] are fugitives from the strictures of civilized society, seekers after adventure and freedom” (1). The journey into Mexico is long, and when they run out of food, their hunger and lowered spirit colours the perception of the landscape, as it is described as “that gray landscape” (87), and Rawlins comments on “the countryside. There aint much happenin out there, is there?” (91). This is in stark contrast with what they were promised by a Mexican they met on the road, who had “made that country sound like the Big Rock Candy Mountains. Said there was lakes and runnin water and grass to the stirrups” (56). However, after some travel they reach the land belonging to a ranch, and the novel describes the landscape they searched for:

they saw below them the country of which they’d been told. The grasslands lay in a deep violet haze and to the west thin flights of waterfowl were moving north before the sunset in the deep red galleries under the cloudbanks like schoolfish in a burning

sea and on the forelands plain they saw vaqueros driving cattle before them through a gauze of golden dust. (95-96)

This description shows Mexico as a landscape of exquisite beauty, in which the vaqueros, or cowboys, live the life John Grady is looking for. As Sickels argues, “[w]hereas McCarthy’s earlier descriptions of the Mexican landscape concentrate on its aridity and barrenness, the ranch is characterized by its abundant fecundity” (349). This is in line with the raised spirits of the protagonist, as his hopes of an idyllic life are centred on a ranch.

At the point in *All the Pretty Horses* that the boys reach Mexico, Sullivan claims that “[t]he story, as McCarthy tells it, is a pastoral” (3). At the ranch, John Grady proves his worth with horses. However, he foolishly starts a relationship with the ranch holder’s daughter, Alejandra. Kollin comments on this, saying that “John Grady ends up sowing the seeds of his own destruction, bringing an end to the mythic landscape of his dreams” (574). The relationship thrives in the outstretched plains surrounding the ranch. As Sullivan argues, “[John Grady and Alejandra’s] relationship is nourished by the Mexican countryside, by the fields and woods and the ponds where they water their horses in the moonlight. Their characters are defined by the landscape” (3). John Grady finds himself accused of crimes he did not commit, as the ranch holder tries to get John Grady away from Alejandra. Surviving imprisonment, John Grady eventually makes his way back north to Texas. Despite everything, he feels that Mexico holds promise, and still perceives the landscape as beautiful: “[t]he rain had ripened all the country around and the roadside grass was luminous and green from the run-off and flowers were in bloom across the open country” (263). Texas, however, is described as “the plain to the north where cattle were already beginning to appear slouching slowly out of that pale landscape [...] and he thought about his father who was dead in that country” (294). To his friend Rawlins, John Grady admits “[Texas] aint my country” (307). John Grady Cole admits that Texas is no longer the place of his attachment, even though he

has been born and raised there. As Blair states, “Mexico and the borderlands represent to John Grady the possibility of the expression of whom he sees himself to be: it is an old place, a dangerous place, where little has changed and the history is violence” (304). John Grady has met this violence, and is forced to return to Texas, even though he no longer feels at home there.

The story of McCarthy’s *The Crossing* is one of a young boy, Billy Parham, who seeks adventure in the wild country of Mexico and ends up losing everything except a horse and his life. Like *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing* deals with an increasingly modernized American landscape and a protagonist who seeks the old-fashioned life. The story starts in a newly formed county described as “rich and wild” (3). The land is not yet named, and Billy, together with his father, names it. This leads Kollin to argue that “[n]aming the country around him, Billy becomes Adam in the garden, living in a state of wonder that is temporarily outside the encroachments of history. As the region starts to fill in with other white settlers, however, his early connections with the wild are destroyed” (578). One of the features of the country that is mentioned repeatedly is the Mexican mountains in the distance. These are described in the following way: “Before him the mountains were blinding white in the sun. They looked new born out of the hand of some improvident god who’d perhaps not even puzzled out a use for them. That kind of new.” (31) This glorified perception of Mexico precedes his yearning for adventure in that country, and a restored link with the wild. The outstretched setting of the novel’s opening is established through the account of someone who tells him that he had been “walking nine days through mountain and desert till he got there and nine days back” (96).

Similar to *All the Pretty Horses*, the protagonist’s perception is coloured by his state of mind, emphasized by a man who tells Billy that “the world could only be known as it existed in men’s hearts” (137). This leads Billy Parham to experience the countryside as “[a]ll about

him an enormous emptiness without echo.” (152) This perception comes from the fact that “*The Crossing* is ultimately a melancholy text that begins with fantasies of the region’s promise but ends by revealing them to be illusions” (Kollin, 581). Billy makes three trips to Mexico in the course of the novel. On the first trip he attempts to return a wolf to the Mexican countryside. This wolf symbolizes the wild nature that Billy longs for, which explains why he tries to release it away from his home, rather than simply kill it. On the second trip into Mexico, on which he is accompanied by his younger brother, Billy looks for his family’s stolen horses. In trying to get back these horses, Billy shows his adherence to an old-fashioned sense of justice, as well as his love for animals. As Sullivan argues: “[b]oth John Grady and Billy are driven as well by their attachment to the land and their devotion to animals” (2). On the third trip, Billy wants to find back his brother, who he lost on the previous trip. He finds only his brother’s remains. This mirrors *Michael K*’s lack of nourishment given by the land, albeit a spiritual nourishment in McCarthy’s novel.

Both Billy and *All the Pretty Horses*’ protagonist John Grady travel to Mexico in order to find something intangible that is lost in America. Bourne states that “McCarthy’s protagonists long for [a] sense of ‘rootedness’ in the landscape that seemingly equates with their deep desire for a stable, knowable identity” (113), and goes on to say that “[i]t is the mythic lifestyle associated with the West that John Grady and Billy attempt to cling to in creating their identity” (120). However, the crossings into Mexico themselves disengage the protagonists from any rootedness they had, as is argued by Kollin: “the movement across national dividing lines immediately alienates the boys from themselves and their surroundings” (580). Kollin also argues that “*The Crossing* is more interested in detailing the costs of the dream” (576), and claims that “*The Crossing* shows the cowboy’s life as lonely and isolated” (577). Billy loses every member of his family and most of his personal possessions. He ends up alone and lost, which leads Bourne to state that “[Billy] is consumed

by the loneliness of his position, a loneliness that is echoed by the isolated landscape [...] [a]lthough he is alone in the wilderness, intimately aware of the terrain, he does not feel a part of the place” (112-113).

Finally, *Cities of the Plain* takes place in New Mexico, near the border towns of El Paso and its Mexican counterpart Juárez. As Sickels argues, “McCarthy’s trilogy chronicles the death of the traditional American pastoral dream” (347). This death is finalized in *Cities*, as both protagonists of the Border Trilogy’s earlier novels come together. John Grady still cannot let go of his dream of being a true, old-fashioned cowboy, and he even falls in love with a young prostitute, Magdalena, who resembles Alejandra. Billy is less ideological about the cowboy way of life, and when John Grady asks him “[w]hat would you do if you couldn’t be a cowboy?” Billy answers “I don’t know. I reckon I’d think of somthin” (219). Billy’s desire for a restored contact with the wild, as chronicled in *The Crossing*, is gone. The landscape in *Cities* shows the extent of loss of wilderness. As Sickels states; “In the trilogy’s earlier volumes, towns were intrusions on the western landscape; the reverse is the case in *Cities of the Plain*”(358). Sickels narrows down this intrusion, stating:

Over [the trilogy’s] course, John Grady Cole comes to think that maybe, just maybe, he will not be able to live his pastoral dream life on American soil [...] [t]he Mexico represented in *Cities of the Plain* is not the idyllic pastoral fantasy land of [*All the Pretty Horses*] but the brutal and sordid urban reality of Juárez. (358-359)

This loss of the pastoral dream is shown in the way that “[o]ver the course of the trilogy, the bulk of which occurs in Mexico, ostensibly a further frontier, the serenity of the pastoral landscape is repeatedly undermined by the naturalistic intrusion of violence and mechanization” (Sickels, 348). *Cities of the Plain* completes this mechanization, as “[t]he sense of a natural world, benign and supportive, that authenticates the relationship between John Grady and Alejandra is absent here” (Sullivan, 3-4). Both protagonists long for what is

gradually lost in the American landscape, and both of “the [protagonists] waver between their long-held illusions about the nature of the landscape and the emerging physical reality of construction and industry which create a space that is fast becoming unrecognizable and inscrutable to its inhabitants” (Bourne, 111).

Looking at the countryside is human nature, especially when we are surrounded by the type of landscapes that the protagonists in the novels discussed find themselves in. The outstretched desert is timeless, and settlers and pioneers, the protagonists’ ancestors, have encountered such landscapes repeatedly. The difference between the South African J.M. Coetzee and the American Cormac McCarthy is shown in their attitudes towards the countryside, shown in their descriptions of said countryside. This difference can be established quite simply. J.M. Coetzee clearly views the countryside in terms of fertility or lack thereof, in other words in terms of life giving. Cormac McCarthy, however, views the landscape, or more specifically his protagonists’ view of the landscape, as an extension of their personal development and experience, thus making the landscape into something decidedly personal. One could argue that Coetzee views the landscape as nature outside of man, a limit on freedom and a source of food. McCarthy, however, views the landscape as an extension of man’s experience and mental state.

“Honesty is never seen sitting astride the fence.” – Lemuel K. Washburn

Fences

Fences play a large part in the novels of both J.M. Coetzee and Cormac McCarthy. Most of this research deals with the nature of open spaces and landscapes in the novels. The role of fences in the landscapes of both authors is that of interruption and limiting of freedom of movement. However, both authors have additional meanings tied to the fences in their novels. Coetzee employs fences to indicate borders which are meant to keep people in or out of a certain area. In McCarthy’s Border Trilogy, however, the fences are a sign of the disappearing pastoral ideal which the protagonists long for.

Fences are often an appropriation of ownership. It is this fact that puzzles Michael when he is told he should leave the ‘veld’ he is in on his journey. Michael finds no fault with his own actions, as he simply feels more comfortable walking and sleeping in the open countryside on the other side of the fence he just crossed, rather than on the highway he was walking on. However, an old countryman warns him, by telling him “They find you in their veld, they shoot you!” (46) This shooting enforces the ownership created by the fence in the middle of the country. Despite the warning, Michael K continues to travel through the country and “[t]he anxiety that belonged to the time on the road began to leave him” (46).

The ownership instated by fences is strongly linked to a dynastic desire. Here follows a short passage, in which Michael K explains how he understands the desire of ownership of such widespread and empty fields.

He could understand that people should have retreated here and fenced themselves in with miles and miles of silence; he could understand that they should have wanted to bequeath the privilege of so much silence to their children and grandchildren in perpetuity (though by what right he was not sure). (47)

Michael links the desire of ownership to the desire to procreate. However, as Paul Franssen argues, “Michael does not have any dynastic ambitions at all, nor any desire to leave a mark on the landscape” (p.458). The fact that Michael does not understand by what right someone might claim land may have to do with the racial implications, as the Boers that claimed the land in the countryside were white in a country previously belonging to black or coloured people. As Nadine Gordimer states in her review of *Life and Times of Michael K*, “this is the land that was taken by conquest, and then by deeds of sale that denied blacks the right even to buy back what had been taken from them.” (Gordimer) The apartheid politics of twentieth century South Africa physically separated whites from blacks and coloured, and as Neimneh and Muhaidat argue, “K is also an oppressed other because of the segregated racial politics of the country” (p.14). Even though Michael’s ethnicity is never explicitly stated in the novel, the way the authorities treat him and the living conditions of his mother indicate he is definitely not white. The fences physically embody the white supremacy, which could be another reason why Michael dislikes fences.

Fences are perceived as a problem for Michael K. Michael’s attitude towards fences is clearly described by Franssen, who states that “[l]ike nomads, K dislikes and disregards fences and borderlines and the repressive power structures they symbolize” (459). Fences, however, have become an integral part of the countryside in which Michael K finds himself. This is emphasized at a later time, when Michael K is put to work on a farm repairing fences. The farmer compliments Michael and tells him “[y]ou should go into fencing. There will always be a need for good fencers in this country, no matter what” (95). This work is offered Michael as he has been placed in a camp where coloured people are held captive, although he refuses the work motivated by his dislike of fences. In fact, when the little plot of land that Michael cultivates at the Visagie farm, the place where he makes his home after his trek inland, is threatened by goats, Michael does not put up a fence around the plot, but rather

adjusts his schedule of sleep and work (103). The camp where Michael is incarcerated consists of fences as well, illustrating another function of fences in Coetzee's South Africa; they can keep people in as well as out. However, the limits of fences are made abundantly clear, as Michael K manages to escape incarceration quite easily.

In Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* the reader is shown the other side of the South African fences, as relayed through the eyes of the novel's protagonist Magda, the daughter of a South African farmer. The novel's structure is almost completely the opposite of that found in *Life and Times of Michael K*. The latter novel was divided into only three chapters, the middle of which relates part of Michael's story through the eyes of a different character, whereas *In the Heart of the Country* is split up into two hundred sixty-six short sections that are numbered and rarely take up more than a page in the novel. This excessive bordering of text mimics Magda's desire for borders, just as *Michael K*'s lack of borders mimics Michael's desire for freedom. Magda herself primarily links fences to a similar function as the one mostly expressed by Michael K, namely that of making a claim of ownership on the land. She illustrates this when she says "[her coloured servant] Hendrik's forebears in the olden days crisscrossed the desert [...] then one day fences began to go up" (20). The fences symbolise Magda's family's ownership of the land and at the same time they form a means of keeping unwanted neighbours out. Magda feels safe inside the fences, but has never seen anything further outside the fences than her eyesight reaches. As she puts it herself: "always assuming that we have neighbours, I see no evidence of it, we might as well be living on the moon" (45). The other function of fences, keeping people in, is felt by Magda, who feels tied to the farm and never leaves it. The artificiality of the borders created by fences is made real in Magda's perception, as the world outside the farm's fences, although seen across the fences, is never physically experienced. This is emphasised at a later passage by Magda when she describes the farm as an "island out of space, out of time." The

artificiality of the borders is later addressed by Magda, when she is left alone on the farm and states that “the land knows nothing of fences” (124). This last point links *In the Heart of the Country* to *Life & Times of Michael K*.

Cormac McCarthy’s usage of fences differs somewhat from Coetzee’s. All three of the novels in the Border Trilogy take place in both the South of the United States of America and in Mexico. This border, or at least the part of the border that is encountered in *All the Pretty Horses*, is not created by fences but by a river. The border in *The Crossing* and in *Cities of the Plain*, is formed by a toll-booth on the road. Fences do make an appearance in the novels, but notably only on the American side of the border. This illustrates the nature of both protagonists’ adventures and perceptions, as they both desire to find adventure and freedom in Mexico and perceive fences as an indication of limits imposed on their freedom. They do this also to escape the encroaching modernity on the American side of the border. As Sickels argues, “Cole and Parham, feeling the encroachment of increasing urbanization, leave the American Southwest to seek a simpler, more pastoral existence in Mexico” (347). The fences first encountered in *All the Pretty Horses* are signifiers of this encroachment. These first fences are come across when the protagonist John Grady Cole and his friend Lacey Rawlins set out on their journey south. By noon of their second day of travelling they encounter a fence, which they need to remove and rebuild behind them. This motivates Rawlins to ask “[h]ow the hell do they expect a man to ride a horse in this country?” (31) John Grady’s answer shows his personal drive for undertaking the dangerous journey south, as he states “[t]hey dont” (32). The later absence of fences in Mexico, or more precisely the perceived and related absence of fences, emphasizes the freedom and possibility that the boys look for in that country.

The meaning of fences as boundaries of freedom, more than as indicators of ownership, is repeated in *The Crossing*, when in the novel’s first paragraph McCarthy

describes a family's settling in a new county, which is described as "rich and wild. You could ride clear to Mexico and not strike a crossfence." (3) Here, the absence of any fence is indicative of the promise of freedom held by the land, which is described as "unfenced grasslands" (252). This freedom, later constrained by the growing and changing population in the region, leaves a strong impression on the novel's protagonist, Billy Parham. As Susan Kollin describes it,

Naming the country around him, Billy becomes Adam in the garden, living in a state of wonder that is temporarily outside the encroachments of history. As the region starts to fill in with other white settlers, however, his early connections with the wild are destroyed. (p.578)

The fences not only serve to limit the freedom offered by the region, but are also an indication of the encroaching modernization. The connection to the original, wild nature of the region that Billy seeks is personified in the form of the wolf that enters the county and which Billy attempts to take to Mexico instead of killing it. The constriction on the wild as exerted by the fences is indicated in the novel's description of the wolf's behavior, as "[the wolf] would not cross a road or a rail line in daylight. She would not cross under a wire fence twice in the same place. These were the new protocols. Strictures that had not existed before" (25). In other words, as Sickels identifies it: "The wolf's behavior demonstrates an aversion to the technological and urban development of the country" (352). Billy's decision to return the wolf to Mexico shows his longing for the now severed connection to the wild.

The interruptions of the landscape in *Cities of the Plain* are typified in form different from fences. In fact, the open landscape is disappearing quickly in *Cities*. This is also noted by Robert Sickels, who states that "In the trilogy's earlier volumes, towns were intrusions on the western landscape; the reverse is the case in *Cities of the Plain*" (358). However, fences do not feature prominently in the novel. The only mention of fences is a reference to the dry

and arid nature of the land, when Billy says to John Grady “[g]oddamn ground wont even hold a fencepost” (11). The role of fences in the first two novels of the trilogy, interruption of freedom and a sign of encroaching modernity, is fulfilled by the cities of El Paso and its counterpart Juarez. In *Cities*, the protagonists travel across the border repeatedly, which only leads to further alienation from their ideal. The cause of this is described by Kollin, who states that “the movement across national dividing lines immediately alienates the boys from themselves and their surroundings” (p.580). This sense of alienation is also identified by Sickels, who states that “Cole’s sentimental dream of a pastoral existence is permanently interrupted by the presence of cities on the plain” (355). So the restricting aspect of the fences is fulfilled by the cities, which can be said to be the result of the aforementioned encroaching modernity on the plains.

“We would like to live as we once lived, but history will not permit it.” – John F. Kennedy

History

The main focus of this research is on the different uses of the open landscape by a South African and an American writer, which means a focus on the South African landscape from the one writer and the Texan, New Mexican and Mexican landscape from the other. Both regions have an impressive past which has left its traces on all people who reside there. As the history of both regions is tied to ownership of the land, the history is linked to the subject of this research. On closer inspection it can be seen that J.M. Coetzee roots his protagonists firmly in the South African past, and South Africa's history of apartheid is shown in the landscape. Cormac McCarthy describes a Mexico that is steeped in bloody history, where the brutal nature of Northern Mexico is as promising as it is dangerous.

In the Heart of the Country is placed within South African history, and shows the way a single person perceives that history. The novel is told from the perspective of Magda, the daughter of a South African farmer. The farm is situated in a desert area, comparable to the inland of South Africa known as the Karoo. The only indication of the farm's location is the name of the nearest town, Armoede. The only Armoede in current South Africa is a small farm north of Pretoria. It is the isolation of the novel's farm and the landscape around it that is reminiscent mostly of the Karoo, an area that played an important part in South Africa's history. Coetzee creates a setting that clearly refers to South African history, as the foundation for the modern South African state was laid when settlers of Dutch descent, the Boers, moved away from the Cape towards the Karoo and beyond. It is also the descendants of the same Boer settlers who later instituted the political system of apartheid, separating the white population from black and coloured people in a way that was highly favourable for the white people. The nation's colonial history is portrayed in later stages of the narrative. For instance, in the distance that Magda feels towards the coloured servants on the farm, which is a clear

example of a colonial setting. Magda is very much aware of her position in relation to the servants, which she shows when she contemplates how to behave in front of her neighbours, thinking “how will I ever deal with them by myself? If I make Hendrik my foreman will he be able to run the farm while I stand severely behind him pretending he is my puppet?” (126)

This distance between Magda and her servants is exemplary of the balance of power in South Africa prior to the official introduction of apartheid. The strong influence of this colonial distance between white and coloured people in South Africa made the implementation of apartheid easily possible in South Africa, as coloured people never had had any influence. Neimneh discusses apartheid as well when she says that “[w]e should remember that the word “apartheid” itself means separateness, i.e. separating the races from each other. Such a separation was mainly achieved over the land and its natural resources to the deprivation of nonwhites” (17). This separation is an important part of *In the Heart of the Country*, as Magda is unable to properly lead the farm, and her servant, who could properly lead the farm, is unable to do so because of his race. As such, the racial separation leads to the eventual decline of the farm.

Magda’s narrative also deals with the questions of freedom and possession, which are also a part of South African history. The claiming of a piece of land as one’s property in freedom is questioned by Magda when she states that “[n]o one is ancestral to the stone desert” (20), implying that the desert is not for anyone to claim. Magda also tells the reader about the way a teacher used to be contracted at the farm, so that “the children of the desert should not grow up barbarian but be heirs of all the ages” (50). This is not necessarily part of Boer history, but it is definitely colonial. As such, Magda’s upbringing is rooted in the colonial history of South Africa, a history that colours her views and feelings throughout her narrative. The isolation of the farm, combined with the fact that Magda feels a traditional distance towards both the servants and her father, leave Magda lonely. This distances the

novel from what Coetzee describes as a typically white Afrikaner South African mind-set; “[...] an organic mode of consciousness belonging to a people who, from toiling generation after generation on the family farm, have divested themselves of individuality and become embodiments of an enduring bloodline stretching back into a mythicized past” (*White Writing*, 6). Magda’s inability to fulfill the women’s traditional functions at the farm, due in part to episodes of migraine, sets her apart from this consciousness. This serves to further her sense of isolation, as she physically rebels and refuses to relate to her ancestral heritage. This isolation is harrowing for Magda, as Vital argues; “we are organisms interacting constantly with an environment and that environment will involve members of our own species, members of other species and elemental matter. Without these interactions we would not have bodily existence” (92). Magda expresses the problem of this isolation as well when she says “[t]oo much misery, too much solitude makes of one an animal” (58). In this instance, Magda addresses both her physical isolation in the desert area, as well as her isolation from the other inhabitants of the farm.

In Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K* one sees a strong assimilation of history. The setting for the novel is a South Africa torn apart by civil war between the white administration and the coloured and black people over the inequality created by the Apartheid system. The influence of the Boer wars is strong in *Life and Times of Michael K*, as the novel’s on-going conflict in many aspects mirrors those conflicts. Also, the South African history of the Great Trek is mirrored clearly in Michael’s journey. He ventures into the South African mainland, taking a North-eastern direction away from the Cape Peninsula. This mimics the journey made previously by the Boers in the Great Trek. In the novel, the tactics of the black guerrillas in the mountains are similar to those of the Boers during the Anglo-Boer Wars. Where the Boers won the first Anglo-Boer War by using guerrilla tactics, in the novel their white descendants find themselves battling black guerrillas in the mountains. This

is made clear to Michael in the work camp Jakkalsdrift, where he is told the purpose of the camp is to “stop people from disappearing into the mountains and then coming back one night to cut their fences and drive their stock away” (80).

Another aspect of history that is assimilated in *Life and Times of Michael K* is the use of camps during a war. The work camp Jakkalsdrift and the rehabilitation camp where Michael is placed after having been captured specifically mirrors the concentration camps used by the British in the second Anglo-Boer War. The main goal of the camps in that war was to deprive the fighting Boers of supporters that could give them food. In this way the British attempted to starve the Boers into submission. (BBC History) Because of lack of care and faulty administration the concentration camps claimed several thousands of lives. This fact was later utilized by the Afrikaners to increase Afrikaner nationalism. The camps in the novel serve a function similar to that of concentration camps, namely to deprive the insurgent men of support and freedom. The fact that the Afrikaners in the novel use the very device that they have demonised earlier is ironic; an effect which is also established by Michael’s mirroring the Great Trek as a coloured man. Michael focuses strongly on the environmental impact of the camp and is also well aware of the negative effect that the camps have on nature, as Michael “thought of the camp in Jakkalsdrif, of parents bringing up children behind the wire, their own children and the children of cousins and second cousins, on earth stamped so tight by the passage of their footsteps day after day, baked so hard by the sun, that nothing would ever grow there again” (104). This links the camps to the landscape as another example of how “[p]olitical unrest deforms human relations and negatively affects the earth” (Neimneh, 17). Furthermore, Neimneh also reminds the reader of the fact that “[i]t is not only territory and material objects that carry the imprint of colonial history: K’s official racial classification indicates how he too has been inscribed with an identity [...] rooted in a colonial past” (94). This denomination is rather ambiguous, however, as the report in which

the categorisation of Michael as coloured is made makes many mistakes regarding other facets of Michael as a person. As such, South Africa's history of violence and racial tension is clearly visible in Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*.

Michael K does not actively attempt to distance himself from his country's history, but rather tries to find his own place. For instance, when during his second stay at the Visagie farm a group of rebels stays at the farm. As Michael watches these rebels from a distance, he realises:

[...] it was not soldiers who were camping at the dam [...] but men from the mountains, men who blew up railway tracks and mined roads and attacked farmhouses and drove off stock and cut one town off from another, whom the radio reported exterminated in scores (108)

Michael consciously decides not to join the rebels after they leave. He feels he should stay behind to take care of his farm, for "there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening" (109). This shows that Michael is aware of leaving behind something of himself. This refutes what Gordimer said, namely that "[n]o one in this novel has any sense of taking part in determining that course [of history]" (Gordimer). A similar argument is made by Franssen, who argues that "Michael does not have any dynastic ambitions at all, nor any desire to leave a mark on the landscape" (458), and that "[t]he only progeny that Michael does envisage for himself is that of the plants he grows: he conceives of the pumpkins and melons as his children" (458). Michael's awareness of staying behind in order to keep alive gardening for society shows that "[a]ttending nature [...] is an attempt to counter the strained politics of the country Coetzee depicts in the novel" (Neimneh, 13). This awareness was already explained by Gordimer, arguing that "[f]rom this perspective the long history of terrible wars [...] could, I suppose, be turned away from; only the death of the soil is the end of life" (Gordimer). Michael does feel that this is the case and as such applies

himself to the preservation of gardening.

Another important facet of South African history in the novels is linked to the idea of ownership. South Africa's history is marked by repeated changes in ownership. First the claim of the lands close to the coast by the Dutch settlers, displacing local African peoples. Later the descendants of these settlers, the Boers, were displaced by the British, driving them into the interior of the country where they appropriated lands from African tribes. Later the Boers nations, founded in the appropriated lands in the interior were besieged by the British because of the resources in those areas. This continual dispute over the ownership shows the tenuous nature of ownership in South Africa. Ownership is addressed in both of the discussed novels by Coetzee. In *In the Heart of the Country* Magda states that “[n]o one is ancestral to the stone desert” (20). She questions both her ancestors' ownership of the farm, as well as the claim any South African natives might make. In the case of *Life & Times of Michael K*, the novel's protagonist actively tries not to make a permanent claim on the land, stating that “[t]he worst mistake [...] would be to try to found a new house, a rival line” (104). Both novels address issues of ownership like those found in South African history.

Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy is set in the Southern states of Texas and New Mexico, but more significantly it is set for the largest part in the north of Mexico. It is the history of Mexico that comes back in his novels most often. The novels take place in the time around the Second World War. At that time Mexico was still recovering from the bloody period known as the Mexican Revolution. The Mexican Revolution points to the period from 1910 to 1917, which ended in the forming of Mexico's constitution, which is still in use today. The revolution was initially a protest started by the middle class, fighting the despotic rule of President Porfirio Diaz. The revolution ended a feudal system and created opportunities for farmers all over the country, thus reforming the notion of ownership of land in Mexico. The Mexican Revolution cannot be seen separate from the notion of ownership.

The reform, however, was not achieved easily as the country descended into civil strife following the initial overthrowing of President Diaz. The ensuing situation was violent, with independent activists in the Southern jungles and the Northern mountains rampaging through villages and targeting farmers everywhere. Understandably, this period left traces in the country that are still fresh in the time that the Trilogy's protagonists make their way in that scarred land.

In the Trilogy's first novel, *All the Pretty Horses*, the Revolution is introduced when the protagonist, John Grady, returns to the hacienda, or ranch, after his period of captivity. The aunt of John's former love Alejandra, Alfonsa, talks to John about his captivity and his plans in Mexico from now on. She tries to teach him about Mexico and life, and one of the tools she uses for this is her experience with the Mexican Revolution. As Sickels states: "[s]ignificantly, Alfonsa remembers not a past Mexico of pastoral paradise" (350). One of the actual Revolution's main characters was Francisco Madero, the man who initially called for Diaz' resignation as president, which in turn sparked the Revolution. Alfonsa tells John "[i]n the family of Francisco Madero there were thirteen children and I had many friends among them" (238). She recognizes that Mexico has changed, and needs to continue to change, and she sees John Grady as "[...] antiquated and obsolete in Mexico's new and increasingly modern urban context" (Sickels, 351). John Grady, who seeks his ideal life as a cowboy in Mexico, does not fit there either. In trying to escape the increasing modernization of America, he finds a different kind of change in Mexico, but still a change that leaves him behind. In this way, McCarthy uses the Mexican Revolution as a lesson.

The second part of the Border Trilogy, *The Crossing*, features a large part devoted to Mexican history. The novel's protagonist, Billy Parham, comes across a number of largely prophetic characters in Mexico, all of whom attempt to teach him about Mexico's violent nature, and more often than not this lesson is based on the Mexican Revolution. One example

of this is the Mormon in the deserted town who came there “because of the devastation” (145). He tells Billy about certain atrocities committed during the Revolution to illustrate the violent history. As Bourne argues; “[t]he actions of the characters, as well as the shadows of earlier conflicts associated with sociopolitical strife in Mexico and the southwestern United States, add an element of social construction that also shapes the environment” (111).

McCarthy’s use of history is explained by one of his prophetic characters in the statement that “what endows any thing with significance is solely the history in which it has participated.” (416) Thus, the Mexican Revolution gives Mexico significance as a violent area.

The third part of the Border Trilogy, *Cities of the Plain*, uses history in a way that is similar to the other parts of the trilogy. A major difference, however, is that in *Cities* the tales of the Revolution are told by Americans, thus providing the view of an outsider of the period. The view expressed focuses mostly on the confusion of the period, as someone tells John Grady “You’d wake up in some little town on a Sunday mornin and they’d be out in the street shootin at one another. You couln’t make any sense of it” (65). The landscape still bears the scars of the conflict, as is noticed by Bourne when she says that “[i]n each book of the trilogy, John Grady and Billy ride through places that, though empty and peaceful at the moment, are haunted by the echoes of violence and primitive history” (118). This is clearly shown in *The Crossing*, when Billy meets a priest in an abandoned village. The priest is the sole remaining inhabitant of the town, as the others have been killed during the Mexican Revolution, as the priest himself relates to Billy. The town around the priest becomes haunted by the revolution’s victims’ ghosts as the priest tells their story.

We have seen that Coetzee uses history by assimilating it. He places his characters within South African history and then makes statements by mirroring certain aspects of that history. In this way he sometimes creates motivation and other times he creates irony. Furthermore, South Africa’s history of repeated acquisition of land, thus pulling into question

ownership of the land, underlines the issue of ownership in both of Coetzee's discussed novels. McCarthy's use of history focusses more on the violence of the events that have taken place in Mexico during the Mexican Revolution, emphasizing the unforgiving nature of the country to which both protagonists of the Border Trilogy try to escape, away from a changing America in which they no longer feel at home.

“Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains.” – Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Captivity

When comparing the previously discussed novels by Coetzee and McCarthy on a basis of the role landscape plays, the most important factor that one sees is the freedom the landscape promises, or more accurately the sense of freedom. The complete opposite of this freedom is captivity, which unsurprisingly plays an important part in the work of both authors as well. This chapter will deal with captivity in Coetzee’s novels *In the Heart of the Country* and *Life and Times of Michael K*, as well as McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*. Captivity in these novels is not limited to physical incarceration, but also deals for a large part with the feeling of being bereft of freedom. These two different types of captivity are found separately in Coetzee’s novels, and are both found in McCarthy’s trilogy opener.

The setting for *In the Heart of the Country* almost shouts of freedom, but its protagonist is unable to attain that freedom. The novel is set on a farm in the South African rural area, far away from cities and towns, as even neighbours are a rare sight for the farm’s inhabitants. These factors combine to create a space of possibility, where only the limits of the inhabitants themselves put a strain on the options they have for living out their lives. The novel’s protagonist, Magda, is very much aware of this promise, but feels strongly limited by her own inability to form something substantial. This becomes clear when she states that she is “[a]ching to form the words that will translate me into the land of myth and hero, here I am still my dowdy self in a dull summer heat that will not transcend itself” (4). She acknowledges the part she herself will have to play in creating something out of the “heady expansion”, but seems unable to create her own “as-if that marks the beginning” (4). This passage, early on in the novel, gives the first indication of Magda’s struggle to attain the freedom that her surroundings offer her. Magda’s inability to venture outside of the farm is related by her when she states that “I have lived all my life, in a theatre of stone and sun fenced in with miles of

wire” (3). Even though the fields outside the farm stretch on seemingly endlessly, she has remained within the confines of the wire fences all her life. At some point she does speak of a wish she harbours to visit the seaside at some point, in which she also relates the idea that she will “weep [...] for myself, for the life I have not lived” (48). Again, she relates the promise that her life holds, and simultaneously emphasizes her inability to fulfill that promise.

Although the farm is a prison to Magda, the other inhabitants of the farm seem not as limited in their freedom. She lives there with her father and several servants, all of whom are able to and at some point in the narrative do leave the farm. Her father is clearly the head of the farm, as Magda sees him as “his complete masterful self” (60). When her father starts an affair with one of the servants, Magda rebels and kills him. In doing so, she can be said to supplant him as head of the farm. What is more important is that in killing her father Magda seeks to attain her freedom. She indicates the appropriation of authority and freedom when she speaks of “[t]he day I compose my father’s hands on his breast and pull the sheet over his face [which is] the day I take over the keys” (42). The keys, in this case, symbolise both the authority on the farm and the key to her freedom. This dual image is problematic, as the newly attained leadership adds nothing to Magda’s freedom from the farm. It seems she still cannot leave, despite removing the perceived obstacle of her father.

Magda’s limits are for a large part also based cultural limitations on her gender. Coetzee himself argues that “in the [South African] farm novel we find women, in effect, imprisoned in the farmhouse” (*White Writing*, 9). Magda herself, however, distances herself from the cultural image projected on her. She feels she does not look like the typical farm woman, as she states that “[e]ven decades of mutton and pumpkin and potatoes have failed to coax from me the jowls, the bust, the hips of a true country foodwife” (22-23). She is leader of the maids, but she herself does little more than the occasional cleaning. Magda at some point states that “I should have been a man” (22).

A final sense of imprisonment in *In the Heart of the Country* can be linked to the high level of narrative distortion created by the fact that Magda narrates the novel. This form allows her to manipulate the story, which she does at the very start of the novel already, when she already states that the proceedings she narrated earlier did not really happen. Her desire to be a man flows from her strong focus on language, as she feels that “[m]en’s talk is so unruffled, so serene” (22). Instead, “the stories thicken around her, constructing a claustrophobic universe that stifles her” (Briganti,38-39). Clearly, Magda forms prisons for herself through her language, and she is aware of this as a possibility when she asks the question “[i]s it possible that I am a prisoner not of the lonely farmhouse and the stone desert but of my stony monologue?” (13).

Life and Times of Michael K is in many ways opposite to *In the Heart of the Country*. The protagonist is not a white woman, but a coloured man. The novel is not limited in setting to a single farm, but stretches from the Cape deep into the heart of the Karoo, along roads and railroads and across fields. But for now the focus lies on another important difference. In *In the Heart of the Country* the protagonist Magda was the captive of her surroundings, whether it be physical or merely perceived captivity, and wanted to leave her farm and travel to the coast. In the case of *Michael K* the protagonist leaves coastal Cape Town to find his place on a farm in the countryside. Whereas Magda was unable to fulfill her desires and overcome the limitations of her surroundings, Michael has little problem with leaving the Cape Peninsula, even though he is told he cannot “travel outside the Peninsula without a permit” (22). Michael actively claims his freedom by disregarding the limitations of movement placed on him.

An important factor for both novels lies in the fact that Michael does not initially want to leave Cape Town, but it is his mother who wants to return to the farm of her youth. She herself is unable to go there due to illness, so it is up to Michael to take her. Just as is the case for *In the Heart of the Country*, there is a woman who wants to leave, and in the process

places a great strain on the nearest man. In the case of Michael, he has to find a way to circumvent the travel restrictions enforced by the army and has to carry his mother in doing so. Unfortunately it is too late, as Michael's mother dies quickly after they leave the Cape Peninsula. In the case of Magda, she actually takes her father's life.

In the course of the novel, Michael is captured and imprisoned two times. First, he is put in the work camp Jakkalsdrif. Here he is forced to work on farms in the area, and in return he can barely keep himself alive. Michael's position in Jakkalsdrif is explained to him by another captive at the camp, in the following passage:

Jakkalsdrif is your place of abode now. Welcome. You leave your place of abode, they pick you up, you are a vagrant. No place of abode. First time, Jakkalsdrif. Second time, Brandvlei. You want to go to Brandvlei, penal servitude, hard labour, brickfields, guards with whips? You climb the fence [...] it's a second offence [...] It's your choice. (78)

Michael is told he absolutely has to remain incarcerated, even if he does wish to leave. Not only will he have to overcome the obstacle of the camp's fences to leave, he will be considered a criminal if he does escape the confine. This idea of climbing the boundaries as a criminal act is also reinforced when Michael asks one of the guards what will happen if he does climb over the fence. The guard responds by saying "[y]ou climb the fence and I'll shoot you" (85). Still, Michael is unhappy being a captive, and plainly states so; "I don't want to be in a camp [...] let me climb the fence and go" (85). Even though the guard refuses to give Michael permission to leave, Michael manages to escape. In the period following his escape, Michael acts upon his desire to remain free of the camp, working his new farm only by night, out of sight of any people passing by or overhead.

The second time Michael is captured and incarcerated he is put in a rehabilitation camp, called Kenilworth. This camp is situated in Cape Town, effectively returning Michael

to the place he left to begin with. He first arrives in a dire medical condition. He slowly recovers and is forced to live according to the schedule of the camp and his caretakers. However, Michael not only desires to be free from the camp, he actually manages to escape, despite his still wavering health and the relatively strict security at Kenilworth. It is his health that convinces the people of the camp not to pursue him any further. As the doctor says, “[t]he poor simpleton has gone off like a sick dog to die in a corner” (155). In the latter portion of the novel, however, we see that Michael seems to be alive and still desires to return to the Karoo.

The very notion of camps has important ties to history, both generally speaking and specifically for South Africa. The first time in history when people, other than prisoners of war, were imprisoned as a part of the war effort was in the second Boer War. The British army captured all people in the rebelling Afrikaner territories. It is interesting here to see that in the case of the novel it is mostly the descendants of those imprisoned Boer people, as they also officially instated the system of apartheid that most likely lies at the root of the novel’s conflict, that apply the technique. The reason that the Afrikaner civilians were imprisoned is also echoed in the novel, as Michael himself is suspected of running a farm for the benefit of the rebels hiding out in the mountains. Another important link to history lies in the Nazi concentration camps of the Second World War. They were based on the British Boer camps, but took the principle beyond imprisonment to eradication. This aspect is not directly present in the novel. However, the captives do believe their death might be the ultimate goal of the army. This is shown when a prisoner of Jakkalsdrif states that “[...] they are going to do what they always wanted – lock us up and wait for us to die” (94). Michael escapes before the reader gets to see if this will in fact happen, but in war many things can change, and the Nazis also did not start with killing their captives.

The notion of captivity in *Life and Times of Michael K*, as well as the echoes of camps

in history are commented on by Vital, who states that “the allegorical function of the camps in the novel finds in the motif of incarceration an exploration of the exercise of discipline through institutions” (91). Thus, Michael’s refusal to remain incarcerated can be linked to his desire to live by himself, away from society, in a way which differs strongly from society’s norms. Michael lives throughout the novel searching for freedom which his surroundings and society deny him. “K, after all, with a little help from the state, survives to avoid (for the moment) confinement by the state” (Vital, 101). What Vital refers to here is the way in which Michael benefits from both captures, as he regains some health in both camps.

Actual captivity, whether physical or otherwise, does not play a role in the latter two novels in McCarthy’s Border Trilogy. However, the trilogy’s opening book *All the Pretty Horses* has a very significant passage about captivity. The novel’s protagonist, John Grady, has traveled into Mexico in order to escape the encroaching modernization in his native Texas, searching for a freedom he feels is no longer available in Texas. However, his freedom proves similarly elusive in Mexico, as he finds when he starts up a relationship with his employer’s daughter. His employer, after hearing about this, turns John Grady over to the authorities on trumped up charges. He is locked up in a prison where he is forced to fight for his survival every day. This violence culminates in a knife fight with a hired killer, a cuchillero. John Grady wins this fight, and ends up killing the other fighter. Shortly after this fight, John Grady is released. Upon regaining his freedom, he learns that he was freed by his employer’s aunt, Alfonsa.

The episode of John Grady’s captivity links the two factors which heavily limit his freedom in Mexico, namely the violent nature of the country, and the old, aristocratic institutions already in place. Alfonsa releases him at the request of his former girlfriend. In return, Alfonsa explains, she will not permit John Grady to pursue her grand-niece further. As Sickels states, she does this because she views John Grady as “antiquated and obsolete in

Mexico's new and increasingly modern urban context" (351). She is the contrast to John Grady's desire of Mexico, as she herself "[s]ignificantly [...] remembers not a past Mexico of pastoral paradise" (Sickels,350). The Mexico that Alfonsa remembers is that of the Mexican Revolution, which is discussed in the chapter on history. What is important here, is the fact that she believes in the Mexico that was created by the revolution, and in which she feels that John Grady simply will not fit.

John Grady is also changed by his time in prison and by the final fight. Before his captivity he was in effect a helpless, young boy with stars in his eyes. He was looking for an ideal that he could no longer find at home. However, as Brewton states, "[t]he duel with the cuchillero in the prison mess marks [...] a shift in the hero's condition, from victim of the hacendado's revenge and Mexican injustice to avenging angel and redresser of wrongs" (136). In the portion of the novel that follows his incarceration, he first confronts Alfonsa. Then he looks up his former girlfriend, despite Alfonsa's forbidding him. Following a night of passion with his girlfriend, who then still leaves him, he tries to find the police captain who had imprisoned him falsely. His desire is to bring the captain back with him to Texas, where the captain will get a fair trial. This desire for true justice, rather than revenge, shows his new, mature personality. This is also shown when, in the process of confronting the captain, he also regains his and his travelling companion's horses, which had previously been taken from them. Rather than selling the horses, or even just one in order to feed himself or ease his travels, he chooses to return the horses to their owners in Texas. In comparing the narrative previous to John Grady's imprisonment and the narrative following it, the period of captivity seems to facilitate a transformation in the protagonist into a heroic maturity.

Captivity and imprisonment play a significant role in the novels by Coetzee, as well as in the initial novel in McCarthy's Border Trilogy. The difference in their use, however, is greater than the difference in other subjects discussed in this thesis. In the case of Coetzee,

captivity has for a large part to do with a mental situation. This can be seen in the way that the protagonist in *In the Heart of the Country* is unable to free herself because of her personal attitude or perception. In *Life and Times of Michael K*, the protagonist seems unable to remain imprisoned, as he finds a way to elude captivity every time he is captured, showing that his mental freedom translates itself to physical freedom. For McCarthy, the passage about captivity in *All the Pretty Horses* serves as a transformative experience for the novel's protagonist, bringing him into adulthood.

Conclusion

This article has compared the uses of landscape, as well as a few other affiliated subjects, of two highly esteemed writers. The comparison is based on the fact that the authors had many similarities. Of the great South African writer J.M. Coetzee, the novels *In the Heart of the Country* and *Life & Times of Michael K* have been used. For the American Cormac McCarthy, the research has focused on his epic Border Trilogy, consisting of *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*. Firstly, the focus has been on the actual use of the open landscapes, combined with the pastoral and anti-pastoral aspects of the novel. Secondly, the particular role of fences in the novels has been addressed. Thirdly, the opposite of the assumed freedom of the novels' landscapes, namely captivity, has been researched. And fourth, the role of history in the novels, most importantly the role of the landscape in that history, has been explored. When combining the findings of these different focuses, one sees clearly that the writers' uses of the landscape differ strongly, but not in all aspects.

Both Coetzee and McCarthy have delivered what are clearly some anti-pastoral works. Both novels by Coetzee oppose traditional South African pastorals, while McCarthy's novels chronicle the end of the traditional American Western pastoral. However, Coetzee's landscapes are always described in connection with fertility, or lack thereof. In McCarthy's works, the most important function of the landscape is as a reflection of the characters' moods. As such, both writers do write anti-pastorals, but their uses of the landscape therein differ strongly.

Fences fulfil the same function for both writers, namely that of limit. The physical boundaries formed by the fences are always an indication of limits on freedom. In the case of Coetzee, the fences are most notably an indication of a boundary, although they are often physically easily traversed. In the case of *In the Heart of the Country* they indicate the boundaries of the farm, and the novel's protagonist is incapable of crossing this boundary,

though not by any physical cause. In the case of *Life and Times of Michael K* the fences are an indication of ownership and boundaries, and although physically the protagonist feels they are little more than a nuisance, their symbolic importance as signs of unfair landownership is profound. They are also an indication of an aspect of society that the protagonist actually attempts to escape. In the case of McCarthy the fences are an indication of encroaching modernity, threatening the old Western pastoral dreams of the protagonists. They are an indication of the limits of freedom.

The notion of captivity is used very differently by both writers. Coetzee's novels both deal strongly with captivity, as both protagonists are in large parts of the novels imprisoned. The notion of captivity is dealt with heavily, exploring its different meanings for people of different racial background, as well as different gender. In the case of Cormac McCarthy, captivity only plays a role in the trilogy's initial novel, *All the Pretty Horses*. In this novel it serves as a catalyst, forcing the protagonist to undergo a transformation into a more mature Western hero. The episode of captivity also serves to complete the degeneration of Mexico as a peaceful place, showing a stark picture of the violent nature of the country.

The way the writers use history differs much. Both writers infuse their novels with the history of the novels' nations, and that history also deals heavily with the landscape. For Coetzee, the novels appropriate the history and mirror it, altering certain aspects and creating irony in some cases. This is most prominent in the case of *Life & Times of Michael K*, where the protagonist mirrors multiple aspects of South African history, but altering the racial roles. In the case of McCarthy, the bloody history of Mexico is very prominent in the novels. The Mexican Revolution is referred to repeatedly, as characters of an almost prophetic character tell the protagonists of the atrocities in Mexico's past. That past serves to underline the violent and unforgiving nature of the country, refuting the protagonists' expectations of freedom in Mexico. As such, the history is related through tales, showing the grim reality of Mexico.

Both writers show many similarities in the aspects of their novel that deal with the landscape and the roles that landscape can play, but the differences prevail. Despite the many similarities in the setting and subjects addressed in the novels, the way the two writers write those subjects is often vastly different. This can most probably be related to the different national backgrounds. Both nations have a history of a powerful white people and their struggle with the country's native people. The largest difference in this case for both countries is that South Africa chose to subject the local peoples, whereas in the USA the native Americans were killed on a large scale. As such, the racial tensions are strongly present and still current in Coetzee's work, while the only mention of native Americans in McCarthy's trilogy symbolises a past that is disappearing. The many similarities in subject matter, however, are noteworthy, considering the few thousand miles of ocean that separate these two acclaimed writers.

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Proposed lesson plan for literary education based on the research

The following lesson plan will be planned around lessons of approximately fifty minutes. The lesson plan will work best when the group contains a maximum of fifteen students, but due to the nature of most schools the lesson plan will take into account larger classes. I advise any teacher that will give this lesson series, or a series of lessons based on this one, to limit this to one lesson per week, using the other lessons to address the regular curriculum.

I have decided to form a series of lessons based on the research. The form of teaching I choose is group discussions. In this way the teacher can guide the students to make their own findings. A prerequisite for a successful lesson plan based on the research is narrowing down the focus. For the lesson plan I choose to use *Life & Times of Michael K* by J. M. Coetzee and *All the Pretty Horses* by Cormac McCarthy. I choose these books because they are the more accessible books for younger students, and they also encompass the full spectrum of themes discussed in the research. Another prerequisite for properly discussing the novels is that student will have read the novels before the discussions begin. This is the student's responsibility, and it is up to the teacher to guide the discussions in such a way that all students need to have read the novels to be able to partake in the discussions.

The first discussion will mostly be exploratory. The students each have to voice their opinion of the books and also formulate for each novel what they think is the most important theme. Here the teacher will have to make sure the students not only state their opinion, but that they also give their arguments. In a regular sized class this will take up almost the entire lesson. If this is not the case, start building to the aspect of landscapes. Each student needs to write down their description of the landscapes in the novels. Ask a few students to read out their descriptions and discuss these with the rest of the class.

If the previous lesson did not cover the exercise of writing down the descriptions of the landscapes, start the second lesson with this exercise. When this exercise is finished, move onto the role of the landscape in the novels as this has been found in the research. This means that in the case of Coetzee the link to fertility, or lack thereof, is very important to the understanding of the novel. In the case of McCarthy the most important aspect is the fact that the landscapes reflect the moods of the protagonist. If at all possible the teacher should try to guide the students so that they themselves realise these aspects of the novels. Guide the discussion and point out passages as seems necessary.

In the third lesson the pastoral and anti-pastoral nature of the novels is the main focus. Start the lesson by giving a general introduction to the term *pastoral*. Tell the students of the way culture in the city idealises life in the countryside and give some examples. Then explain the way that anti-pastorals subvert these tendencies by incorporating most aspects of the pastoral, but finally coming to a worse outcome. Then let the students identify the pastoral aspects of both novels. When this is finished, let the students state the ways the novels are actually anti-pastorals, rather than pastorals.

The fifth lesson should focus on the role of history in the novels. This lesson needs more preparation from the students, which should take the form of homework given the previous lesson. The students, in groups of two or three, will need to prepare a short summary of either South Africa's history, particularly the Grote Trek and apartheid, or on the Mexican Revolution. A few students will, in this lesson, give short presentations on these subjects. Then the discussion will focus on the part these facets of history are present in the novel. For *Michael K*, this means the students will need to identify the fact that Michael's journey mirrors the journey of the Grote Trek. Also, the students need to identify the aspects of apartheid in the novel. For McCarthy, the aspect of history focusses strongly on the passage involving the great-aunt of the protagonist's lover. The students also need to identify the link

between history and the aspects of landscape and ownership of land. This also ties in with the aspects of apartheid in *Michael K*.

The sixth lesson will focus on the passages of captivity. The students need to identify these passages and what significance these passages have for the entire narrative of the novels. For Coetzee, the passages of captivity contrast the freedom that the protagonist himself seeks in the countryside. For McCarthy, the captivity is a catalyst for the protagonist's transformation in the novel. The students need to identify this and give examples and arguments to support this.

For the final lesson or lessons, depending on how long it will take. The students will need to have formed groups, with a maximum of four members. They will need to give a presentation on one of the subjects that have been discussed in the previous lessons. The presentations need to be five minutes long per person in the group. For example, a group of three students will need to give a presentation of at least fifteen minutes, whereas a group of two student's presentation will only need to be ten minutes long. The presentations need to be thorough on the subject they address. This can be anything discussed in the lessons before this, like the history of either setting of apartheid. The teacher will mark these presentations and combine that mark with a mark for participation during the discussions. This combination will form the final mark for the students on this subject.